

BELGIUM's X-FILES

REGINA's STORY

***The heartbreaking story of a victim of
child prostitution in Belgium who
testified against her powerful abusers.***

By Regina Louf
(Witness X1 in the Marc Dutroux case)

Nobody will ever believe you Regina. And those
who do will be destroyed. I am protected by
powerful people. (Tony Van Den B.)

I dedicate this book to Prosecutor Bourlet and Judge Connerotte, the ones who caught Marc Dutroux, and to the team of Patrick De Baets, the brave policemen who ruined their career by honestly investigating the controversial issue of paedophile networks.

I also dedicate this book to all the missing children many of whom have been murdered by paedophiles and their networks.

And to the four babies I lost: Cheyenne, Eliah, Tiu and Nanook.

For these children the pursuit of happiness wasn't an inalienable right.

Regina Louf

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LEGEND

1. Knokke: Where my grandmother lived
2. Ghent: Where my parents lived
3. Meise: Where my son Tiu was murdered
4. Waarschoot: Where my best friend Clo was murdered
5. Ouderghem: Place of the mushroom farm where Chrissie was murdered
6. 's Gravenwezel: Where Kathy was murdered
7. Places where they hunted children: Knokke, a castle East of Namur; a castle East of Bouillon
8. Marcinelle: Where Sabine and Laetitia were found alive in Dutroux' basement
9. Sars la Buissière: Where the bodies were found of Julie and Melissa, on Dutroux' property
10. Zaventem: Place of the factory where they made child porn movies
11. Jumet: Where the bodies were found of An and Eefje, on the property of Weinstein, a close associate of Dutroux

Introduction

“All right I’ll give you two girls.”

The policemen from the judicial district of Neufchateau, in the Ardennes in the South of Belgium couldn’t believe what they just heard. Was he playing games with them?

On 9 August 1996 a fourteen-year-old girl Laetitia had been kidnapped while she was coming home from the swimming pool in Bertrix. This was a small town in the Ardennes that belonged to the Neufchateau judicial district of Prosecutor Michel Bourlet and Investigating Magistrate Jean-Marc Connerotte. A witness had seen a strange white minivan close to the swimming pool and had remembered part of the licence plate. Under the impulse from Bourlet and Connerotte the police immediately started an investigation because so many girls had disappeared in the period just before. They discovered that one possible match with the partial licence plate number was a van belonging to Marc Dutroux, a known sex offender who had already spent considerable time in prison. On 13 August they arrested him, his wife and a friend and put him through a lengthy interrogation. And after many hours of questioning they suddenly heard him say these words.

But Dutroux wasn’t joking. The policemen drove him to one of the five houses he owned, in the Rue de Philippeville in Marcinelle close to Charleroi, an old industrial town. He led the policemen downstairs into his cellar and opened a carefully hidden small cage. Inside the cage the detectives found not only Laetitia but also another girl, Sabine, who had been kidnapped on 28 May, eleven weeks before. This news hit like a bombshell all around the world. Dutroux became worse than the devil and Bourlet and Connerotte became instant national heroes. There was a wave of euphoria throughout the country. People expected that the many recent disappearances of young girls would soon be solved. They thought that a major paedophile network had been uncovered. But the euphoria was short lived because not long afterwards the bodies of two other nine-year-old missing girls, Julie and Melissa, were found buried on Dutroux’ property. They had disappeared on 24 June 1994. A few days later the police discovered the remains of An and Eefje, seventeen and nineteen years old when they disappeared near Ostend a year before. Their bodies had been buried in Jumet on the property of Bernard Weinstein, a close associate of Dutroux. The nation was plunged into shock and mourned the deaths of the children.

Hello I am Regina Louf, but please call me Ginny.

It was the discovery of Sabine and Laetitia that helped me decide to go to the police and tell them the terrible story of my life. I had the impression that finally there were competent judges who wanted to find the truth about the large number of child disappearances. This was totally new to me. From the age of two I had been sexually abused. In my family this seemed to be normal and the abuse was guarded as a big secret, a taboo. I was not allowed to talk about it probably because I made them a lot of money. I

was part of the so-called “children of death”, the name the abusers gave us. But unlike so many others I didn’t die in the network. I had tried to talk about my abuse to outsiders first as a small child and later as a teenager but the people I had talked to didn’t believe me and every time I had been cruelly punished. In the network the code of silence reigned. If you talked you were severely tortured or even killed. But I managed to get out alive when I was almost sixteen with the help of my future husband Erwin. I kept silent about my abuse though. I started a family but the memories of the abuse were so painful that I had to go into therapy and it took me many years to slowly overcome the emotional damage the abuse had done to me. I would probably have tried to go on with my life and have taken my big secret with me into the grave if Dutroux hadn’t been arrested. At the moment of his arrest I was twenty-seven years old. I had given some information about my network to my therapist and to a good friend. The wave of sympathy for judge Connerotte and prosecutor Bourlet after Dutroux’ arrest convinced my friend to urge me to testify, although I didn’t really want to do that. There was a general feeling in Belgium at that time that sexual child abuse would be history soon.

And so I agreed to testify on condition I could remain anonymous. The police had a code for anonymous witnesses: X. I was the first one and so my codename was X1. It took an enormous amount of energy to describe the cruel treatment I had endured. I had to give detailed descriptions of events that I had tried to forget and this brought me a lot of pain. Things started to go wrong when I mentioned the names of important people who were part of my network. Many abusers were rich businessmen who were not known to the general public but there were also noblemen, bankers and politicians, even government ministers who came on TV regularly. When details about my testimony started to leak, the policemen who interrogated me encountered a growing resistance from their superiors. My testimony matched with the testimony of other X-witnesses and this sent shockwaves through the establishment. Unveiling these dirty secrets would have led to the arrest of important people and I’m convinced this was the reason that it was decided somewhere to stop this investigation.

A cover up operation started that was carried out in several steps. First judge Connerotte, the investigating magistrate who wanted to get to the bottom of it was removed for a ridiculous reason. A little later the policemen who interrogated me were accused of falsifying my testimony, leading the witness etc. and were thrown off the case. They were replaced by a new team that falsified my testimony to make me look crazy and leaked part of this to the press emphasising inaccuracies in my testimony. Nothing was said about the impressive amount of correct details I had given. My house was searched because they thought I had gotten my information from the press, although I had given lots of details that had never been published. Then it was decided to make me look crazy by having me examined by a team of well-known psychiatrists. When their report was too positive for me, a press campaign started to destroy me and the other X-witnesses. Because I was still anonymous at that time I really feared for my life and I accepted a proposal from some journalists to go public. This created a press storm that turned the entire country upside down. A massive counterattack was mounted and most of the media declared me insane in spite of the fact that the psychiatrists had stated otherwise. I had to be insane because I

had become too famous to simply be killed as had happened to about twenty potential witnesses in the Dutroux case. And it wouldn't look good either to kill a mother of four. But I knew too much and could cause too much trouble to influential people. So I had to be silenced. And everyone who supported me was harassed.

But I didn't accept to be declared insane because I had seen too many children being tortured and killed and I decided to publish my story in the main Belgian languages Dutch and French. On 26 October 1998 a judge forbade the publication of my book, but four days later the appeals court overturned the verdict and end October 1998 I published my story. I hoped that this would help convince the authorities to investigate paedophile networks seriously. But it was all in vain. Officially there are no paedophile networks in Belgium and the press cannot write freely about it. There are large amounts of money involved and a lot of blackmail. Only with substantial international pressure will the judicial authorities be forced to bring the truth to the surface, and save the lives of many children. That's why I finally decided to publish an English version of my story.

I had to use nicknames for most of the abusers. Many names of policemen, magistrates, and other people are real though because the individuals didn't object or the names had already been published. I have to caution the reader that this book contains descriptions of very cruel acts but I cannot describe what goes on in child prostitution networks without at least providing some details. If certain parts are too hard to read, please skip a few pages but don't stop reading. I hope that when people know the truth, the sometimes-unbelievable truth, an international movement will finally emerge to stop this barbaric abuse of little children. The truth is so hard that many just refuse to believe it because it destroys the nice image they have about life and the people around them. But I have been in there and witnessed it for many years. I'm not the pathological liar that some would like to think I am.

The networks have to be attacked; the international mafia-like organisations that trade children have to be dismantled and the abusers exposed. My life was an ordeal and my testimony didn't make it any better. But I'm still alive while many children I knew didn't reach adulthood. That's why I call upon all of you to help stop this holocaust.

Ginny

Part One: My life before Marc Dutroux' arrest

1. I must speak out

I throw a ball far away into the meadow behind the little farm that became my home. Isa, my Malinois sheepdog races after her toy that rolls through the grass. I smile when she proudly brings her trophy back to me. I caress her head and grab the ball to throw it away again in a wide arch. We could go on like this for hours. Again and again she chases the ball with never ending enthusiasm. In the meantime, Moose, my Saint Bernard and Tembo, my Great Dane are chasing each other in the far corner of the meadow. I throw the ball for the hundredth time and enjoy everything around me, the pink sky at the horizon, the clouds, the haze over the countryside, the smell of the grass, the humid earth. A heron is sitting solemnly on a pole, a hundred meters away, one leg pulled up. My dogs are with me, far away from that strange world inhabited by weird creatures: the people. I love silence. I really don't like to draw attention to myself, and what I have to tell is so painful but I'm prepared to shout it from the rooftops. My past may not and will not die in secret, because it could happen to others too.

It's painful, but I must fight, pass it on. I must talk because keeping silent belongs to the abusers and not to the victims. Because the abusers **have** to keep silent, they don't have any other choice. But victims shall speak out. I want to make everybody aware of the fact that there are people who abuse and exploit children in a cruel and merciless way, without others knowing. I want recognition for the suffering of the victims, who are burdened by the consequences of lengthy and repeated sexual abuse. And I am not the last of the victims.

Here, in the peaceful evening atmosphere, I gather strength again. Tomorrow there will be another day to fight a society that leaves victims out in the cold. I strongly believe that if I speak out, it will make a difference. Nobody has to believe me. I don't ask anybody to feel sorry for me or to support me. I just ask you to listen to what I have to say, and yes, think about it. Does it sound crazy? Am I insane? Or am I mad if I believe there is still hope?

On evenings like this one I am often full of doubts. Have I done the wrong thing to confront people with the ordeal I went through? Was it really worth it? Wouldn't it be better if I had kept my mouth shut? And did I really help the victims or did I brand them all as fantasists, pathological liars and nutcases! Did I motivate other victims to speak out and testify or did I teach them that it's better to keep the secret and shut up?

The most important reason for me to continue my struggle and pass on my knowledge of the children's prostitution network, in which I was caught, is because one day in 1996, two little girls were found still alive in a dark cage in Marc Dutroux' cellar. Nobody in this world can imagine what it meant to me when I saw these girls embracing their parents, alive, safe. How many times have I wished I were one of them?

Normal people don't realise that victims from a paedophile network exist and that they suffer in unseen ways. This isn't easy to explain. But now that I have come to terms with

what happened during my early life I can clearly see the pattern of sexual child abuse. They made me feel so terribly guilty. I thought everything was my fault, that I was a very bad girl. They destroyed my personality by first allowing me to get attached to toys, to animals and then to take them away from me, sometimes killing my animals in front of my eyes. They punished me because I was bad and I was rewarded only when I did what they wanted. I was always insecure because I never knew if I pleased them or not. When I did get attached to other girls in the network, they were singled out and abused in front of me. They tried to destroy all my feelings of warmth and love and turn me into a robot, a kitten that only existed for sex.

Why did I stay so loyal towards my abusers, people ask me? I became attached to them because I entirely depended on them, because they were the only constant in my life. They decided on how much pain I would endure, how long it would last, whether it would continue or stop, whether I would live or die. Other girls disappeared, animals I loved were taken away, who else did I have, other than those who abused me? At least sex was a form of attention, a form of physical contact, something. I hoped that the one who abused me might love me just a little bit. That he would think I was “special”. I mixed up love and sex. And at the same time I was terrified of them. The few times I complained about my abuse to the outside world first as a small child, later as a teenager, I was punished severely. Nobody wanted to believe me and I gave up all hope of ever being able to escape.

My parents did not love me but they kept up appearances. I had to play the little girl that smiled and shook hands, as if nothing were wrong. To the outside world they had created an illusion and it worked. They didn't care about my pain, my loneliness, my fear or my despair.

Is it because the parents insist that it never happened, that no child is abused, mistreated or neglected? Why can parents fool others so easily when they show them youth pictures? “Pictures which so falsely testify of a happy youth”, as the Dutch singer Boudewijn De Groot sang.

Why did they send me away to my cruel grandmother as a toddler? I'll never forgive them for that. I know they both had a job but many couples do and they still manage to take care of their children. Why couldn't they find a different solution, if they loved me so much, as they kept repeating when I testified on TV about my terrible childhood? Why did my mother sell me to a pimp when I was twelve? Did she want to get rid of me? Or was it just for the money? And why did they refuse to admit what they did to me.

“Daddy, I have been repeatedly sexually abused for many years. It's in the report of five well-known psychiatrists and psychologists. I was **abused** Daddy, can you understand? Please admit at least that something was wrong! You knew it all the time.”

“Give me names, Regine”

“Daddy, I did...”

“So, prove it!”

Those were his answers when I confronted him during the police investigation, the day before my twenty-ninth birthday. Asking for proof from his own daughter, who for the

first time had gathered the courage to tell her father what went so terribly wrong. Maybe I hoped he would say, “I’m sorry we didn’t help you”. Yes that’s what I hoped. But now, years later, I know this was an illusion. Just as I had hoped that my mother would admit she gave me to Tony because she was in love with him and she didn’t want to lose him. But he wanted me too. I was the present to keep him attached to her.

Isa sits in front of me wagging her tail. She chews the ball she caught again. I smile, tears come to my eyes. I’m afraid that if I cry, I will never stop, so I don’t cry. I’m afraid that if I start hating, I could never stop, so I don’t hate. I fear that my anger, if I allow it to come out, won’t disappear, so I suppress it. All these questions, all those answers that were never given.

What is the sense of my suffering? I fight the bitterness that overwhelms me, the feeling that I’m fighting a war that I can’t win. Yes I want to cry out how it feels to be a victim, what loneliness is like. That the outside world is like a movie you’re not part of, as if you were standing in front of a large window of a department store, shivering with cold, while inside everything is warm, cosy, inviting, tempting. I have so much to tell about pain and suffering, about wanting to go to sleep never to wake up again.

But I will also tell about recovery, about hope, about getting up slowly, wanting to live again. About healing step by step. About growing stronger. About vindicating one’s rights. About my great husband Erwin who helped me get out of the network and taught me to love life again, with endless energy and patience beyond belief. Indeed, every feeling inside of me had died. Without him I would have languished. Sexual abuse is terrible in itself but even more terrible is the lack of love and affection, which leaves an immense emptiness inside of the victim.

I deserve recognition. Just as all the other victims. No matter how confused our story might be, we have the right to testify. And I even have the duty to testify, because so many other children have been shut up forever. Clo, Chrissie, Marie, Véronique, Kathy, they all died. They were cruelly tortured and murdered.

I can’t abandon them and let them die twice. I have to tell to the world what they can no longer tell. They died while I survived. I wanted so much to be with them, but I continued to live and I saved a voice to tell about the lost lives of the child prostitutes. I cannot stay silent any longer even if speaking about this taboo carries a great risk to my life. I speak for those who no longer have a voice.

2. My early childhood in Ghent

My mother Christiane and my father Georges got married in 1956. My mother was from a well to do family from Knokke, a small resort town at the Belgian North Sea coast right at the Dutch border. During the Middle Ages, when the city of Brugge was called, the “Venice of the North”, the merchant ships sailed into the Zwin, a sea inlet that reached up to the town of Damme. The goods were unloaded from the ships there and transferred onto smaller boats that took their cargo into Brugge along a canal. The many buildings

that are left from this rich Middle Age period have turned Brugge and Damme into very important tourist attractions. Knokke is located at the North Sea coast, right at the entrance of the Zwin, which became silted during the Late Middle Ages and is now a large natural reserve with unique plants and birds. Knokke has become a kind of Belgian Saint Tropez, a place where many wealthy families own an estate.

My mother was a beautiful child and grew into an extremely attractive young lady. She was the pride of my grandfather who became the chief of the Knokke police. Her beauty didn't go unnoticed and my mother was forced to become a call girl for the upper class. My grandfather loved to take her along to their parties. Some people even say that he got his job because of my mother's grace. But when she was twenty her world suddenly collapsed; she became pregnant. Being unmarried and pregnant was very embarrassing in the early fifties in Catholic Belgium, but what made it even worse were the rumours of incest. To avoid scandal my grandmother forced my mother into marrying my father, a poor guy from Ghent. She had met him at the bakery owned by her son André, my mother's brother. A marriage to a girl from a "good family" was like a dream come true and my father didn't mind marrying my mother although she was already three months pregnant. Six months later the baby was born without a doctor, in total secrecy in a room above the bakery. Only my grandmother was present. The baby died and my grandmother put it into a big cardboard cake box from the bakery. She then took it with her on the train to Knokke and buried it in her garden; it's probably still there today. This sounds totally unbelievable to normal people but that was exactly what my mother testified to the police on 6 May 1998, when she was questioned about my abuse.

My mother looked down on my father because of his background but being a divorced woman wasn't socially acceptable in those days so she stayed with him. And my father didn't leave her because he didn't want to lose the comfort of the expensive furniture they bought together. So it's no surprise that they didn't get along. My mother desperately needed attention and physical contact but my father couldn't give her what she wanted. So she started seeing other men. She had two more abortions; at least that's what she told me later. In the late sixties she started a relationship with a Canadian, Alan Ferrer. Alan's father was white and his mother was a Beaver Indian. He worked for American Car Import, a company that imported American cars in Europe. Six months of the year he lived in Belgium, visiting importers in different European countries and giving training to mechanics on how to work on American cars. The other six months, during spring and summer, he lived in Canada. My mother and my grandmother told me later that Alan was my real father. I don't know if I have to believe them but I remember clearly that, when my mother and my father had a fight, she regularly teased him saying about me "She's not your daughter". Is this the reason why my "legal" father didn't care about me? In 1977 my mother and I spent three months in Canada with Alan Ferrer as is described later in this book.

In 1968 my mother got pregnant again. This time my father and the family forced her to keep the baby because another abortion might have been fatal to her. She had to lie down for seven months. When she was eight months pregnant she went through a severe emotional breakdown and wanted the baby to die. She took a lot of tranquillisers and alcohol and she would probably have succeeded if it weren't for the intervention of the

gynaecologist. And so I was born prematurely on 29 January 1969, half a year before Neil Armstrong took his first step on the moon. And although I was very small and fragile, I survived, as I always would later on.

My mother's life-style wasn't adapted to raising children. She couldn't live without her lovers and she made my father take care of me. When he was at work I was sent to a day-care woman. This went on for about a year and a half until something very traumatising happened. I was sitting at the kitchen table in my wooden high chair, eating. I still remember the yellow curtains, my pink and blue cup on the table. My mother wasn't home. My father approached me and started fondling me. And then he did something that filled me with disgust and made me nearly choke. From that moment I screamed in alarm every time he entered the room. I became a difficult child and I held on to my Mommy in panic when she tried to leave me with the day-care woman or with my father. The situation became unbearable at home in Ghent and my parents decided to send me to my grandmother in Knokke during the week, far from the neighbours who raised questions about my screaming. This happened in 1971.

3. My arrival in Knokke

After my grandfather's death, my grandmother Cecile lived alone in the big country house she owned. It was called Sunny Corner and was located at the end of a small path called Golfpad. Long after I broke up with my family and after my testimony threw Belgium into turmoil in 1997, an investigation by journalists showed that my grandmother was known as "Madame Cecile", because she had run a brothel for German officers during the second World War. The place was called King George. She had also run a second more democratic place for the common soldiers.

The move to my grandmother's place was a big shock to me. I was lonely, didn't have brothers or sisters to comfort me and had to live in a big house now with strange noises, in the company of a harsh merciless woman. My grandmother rented the first floor and nine rooms out to tourists. I soon found out that they weren't ordinary tourists; they were men who wanted sex with young girls. In order to keep the secret, they had to undergo a severe scrutiny before they were allowed to come there. Some men came alone, others brought their daughter, and some even came with their wife. And since no one supervised my grandmother she had the opportunity to train me to please her customers, even if this meant that she had to break me.

My grandmother was loved and respected by the community but she had strange habits, which only a few people knew about. Shortly after my arrival she started training me. I remember that I had to play with my toys on the second floor of her country house and was observed and touched by men. How they made me take my clothes off and do games with them naked. Apparently unmoved she lent me out to them in the rooms of her country house; sometimes she even allowed them to take me with them. I was only two when I got abused almost weekly. A year later I was an experienced little whore. I can only remember fragments from that period. I know that Grandma blindfolded me when I

had to go to room six. I remember how I got punished if I didn't immediately do what she told me to.

One day she gave me a little "Colibri" lemonade bottle. It must have been in the spring of 1972. I was three years old because it definitely happened before my fourth birthday.

"Pretend this bottle is an ice-cream-stick, lick it!" she commanded. I thought it was a joke and started laughing, not realizing she was serious about it. She slapped me on the cheek hard and mean.

"Do it!" she shouted.

I put the bottleneck in my mouth and started licking it with trembling lips. My little cheek was burning and I was fighting the tears. I knew Grandma quite well already and I knew how she hated to see me cry. She wanted me to be tough and strong, that's why she beat me so often. I needed to be brought up right she said and rules were necessary. When I accidentally spilled my cup of milk I had to sit on my knees for hours with my hands above my head. I tried to lick the bottleneck, looked at her, timidly, to see if I didn't make her angry. She gave me instructions – do as if you like it, close your eyes! – and I followed them.

After living at her house for almost a year my Mom and Dad had become like shadows, strangers who, each weekend, gave me hope of forgiveness, but sent me back to hell every Sunday evening. Grandma had become the centre of my world. She decided, chastised, and judged. I was scared to death of her. So scared that I didn't dare say anything about what happened, to my Mom and Dad, because Grandma told me that if I spoke I definitely would go to purgatory. And purgatory, this marvellous invention of Catholic superstition, was at least as painful as the boiling hot water in which she once had plunged my little fingers. Each Friday evening she came up with a new kind of warning, like hitting my foot-soles with a bamboo whip, letting me stand for hours with a telephone directory on my head, immersing me in cold water. I was a difficult child she said, and difficult children deserved hell.

I was not allowed to wear the clothes my Mom and Dad gave me. I couldn't sleep with the stuffed animals from home. My toys were for other kids to have fun with; only when they played I was allowed to play too. After the kids of her physical therapist left (they came every Wednesday afternoon), I had to clean up the mess all by myself, after which I was not allowed to touch the toys anymore. My favourite swing set was taken away. It was my fault of course; I hadn't cleaned the table fast enough. Deep in my heart I became a lonely, abandoned child. I laughed because she taught me to. If my smile weakened, even a very little bit, I got punished. I had to be perfect, funny, cute, polite, and well mannered.

A year after my arrival I was drilled like a little soldier, convinced I carried the original sin, another of those beliefs invented to control people's souls. I believed her and followed her like a little puppy while she moulded my soul like a ball of clay. But most of all she enjoyed punishing me. I got to know her methods of punishment very early. She took me upstairs and told me to lie down on the bed of room seven. She tied up my wrists and ankles and watched how a customer slid his fingers in my panties.

“You are a bad child,” she whispered, “so bad that you don’t even resist someone with bad manners.” I tried to put up a struggle, tried to shout but before I could utter a sound she lashed out at my belly with a belt. “Accept your punishment as a strong child!” she yelled angrily.

When I then lay still, biting my lips to endure the pain, she reproached me because I liked this. The customer cut open my panties with a razorblade, pulled my skirt up a little. He stuck his fingers in his mouth, made them wet and slid them inside of me. I braced myself.

“Not too deep,” I heard her say, clinically, cold.

He answered that he knew very well how far he could go. She looked at me with cold, condemning eyes.

“Whore,” she hissed before she left the room.

The customer got all excited and did disgusting things to me. I didn’t dare to move and tried not to throw up. He left. It got dark slowly. My little arms and legs hurt. I became scared and started crying. Did everybody forget me? I called Grandma. I had to pee. Nothing happened, nobody came. I couldn’t keep it up anymore and I wet the bed. When Grandma finally entered the room everything was cold and wet. She yelled that I was a dirty, filthy child and she rubbed my face in the wet blankets. She dragged me downstairs – everything hurt!

“Grandma please, I’m having so much pain!” but she threw me in the bathtub.

She opened the cold-water faucet and thousands of little glass needles pricked my head, shoulders and back. My skirt was soaked and I begged,

“Please, stop! Grandma, it hurts! Grandma I’ll be a good girl, please, I’m so cold.” But she was merciless.

The next morning I had to change the bed, wash the sheets all by myself. Oh God, I felt bad, lonely, and dirty. I put the big sheets into a tub, washed them with my hands numb with cold and wrinkled. A little part of me split off. Moon, the alter ego of the insensitivity came to life.

This was the beginning of my personality disorder. Much later, during the years of therapy I had to go through, I would understand that I suffered from the so-called Dissociative Identity Disorder or DIS, formerly referred to as Multiple Personality Syndrome (MPS). This is a self-defence mechanism, very common with children who suffered severe sexual abuse at an early age. In the child’s imagination, other personalities undergo the abuse so the child can cope with the suffering by suppressing the memory of it. This phenomenon is very well described in the book “The Three Faces of Eve” written by Thigpen and Cleckley.

4. Living at Grandma’s

Disobedience carried a big sentence. I learned this when I was only three years old. I had refused to undress in front of a man – the feeling of shame to expose myself was already great then – and I got a lesson in psychological warfare.

Not me but an older girl, seven or eight years old, got tortured with a razorblade. Her arms, legs, her belly, everything got slashed. Pèpère (little daddy), one of my earliest abusers, rubbed my face in her blood and yelled at me:

“This is your fault! This is what happens when you are bad and disobedient. Ask Martine for forgiveness!”

I stammered out a few words, in between my tears, terrified by the view of all that blood, shaken by the desperate cries of the girl. He lashed out at Martine, kicked her, until I – three years old and hardly being able to produce full sentences – asked for forgiveness. And at least I knew what I had done wrong then.

I had been told for a while now that I was bad. I had to be, because my cousins got everything they liked. The children of her physical therapist, of whom the oldest son was my age, often came to play in the country house, and they received love and attention. She was always nice to them. But when I was alone with her she was always unfriendly and never said a nice word to me. I was a bad kid she said, every day. And I deserved a lesson, the attic for example. The attic where the hook was, and where I got tied up if I had cried. Crying was not allowed, ever. I remember that I cried often enough and every time I was tied up again in that dark, creaking attic. I remember very well how scared I was letting my little legs slide down out of the trapdoor when I was told to go back down. I desperately clung to the edge until my foot had found the upper step of the ladder. It sounds crazy but I was always more afraid of coming back down than of going up. The release was just as scary as the punishment itself. And the fear of heights has remained, even now, many years later.

I remember the voices of my earliest alter egos or alters, who comforted me during these long hours in the dark attic and kept the panic within limits. I remember how the scared little child that I was, floated away when those giant men let their finger slide over my genitals, so I wouldn't feel the fear and the pain. How familiar were loneliness and confusion already then.

“Go ahead, blow them out!” my Mommy laughed and I blew out the four candles on the fruitcake in front of me. Girl, the little alter that repressed the sexual abuse, looked at the candles with big eyes. She threw her little fingers in the air. “Four!” she laughed and everybody was fine, for a while.

Tears ran down my cheeks while I was straining my muscles. The tall man, the man with the cold eyes and iron fists pushed my face onto the table. The woollen tablecloth prickled my cheek. I could see the door leading to the hallway, the clock above the fireplace, the plaster statue of a Saint unknown to me, severely looking towards the opposite wall, the mahogany shelf with copper pots and pans, the dance card hanging from the wall. The second man, smaller and heavier, kicked my legs apart while he opened his zipper. I heard the sound.

“No!!” I screamed, but the scream got smothered in the palm of the tall man's hand.

This was my fourth birthday, I will remember this very vividly later, during my therapy. I was four, because there was a piece of cake left in the fridge, the cake that had been served earlier that day. I had blown out the candles!

That evening I was raped for the first time by the man who, years later, would become my pimp. Tony Van Den Bogaert, from Antwerp, a supplier and user of young children, must have known my grandmother for quite a while. Paedophiles know where they can find each other.

Twenty years later my heart would break when I finally dared to tell Bee Heyse, the therapist who would give my life back to me, that Tony carried me to my room, after I had been anally raped on top of the dining-room table, put me on the bed and ended my virginity at the age of four. Oh God, it hurt so much to say these words, to admit that my childhood was everything but rosy. Having to open my eyes for the lie that I so carefully cultivated cut right through my soul. Being abused when I was twelve was something I could cope with, but being raped when I was still a little, vulnerable being, little Goldilocks, tore me up inside. What in the world could I have done so terribly wrong as a little girl?

“You are bad and rebellious. I will teach you, Regine,” Grandma said harshly, and she jerked off my clothes. I shrunk together, a little girl of four. She turned me around so my back would face her and she put a blindfold on me, a strip of heavy black cotton, which she tied up with a knot. She pushed me down on my knees and I sat down motionless, even after she left the room. I heard voices in the lounge and I could hear them come towards the room. In submission I stayed where I was when the people whom these voices belonged to came in, and I recognized the voice of Pèpère, I smelled his cigar.

“Lève-toi” (get up) and so I did. I didn’t understand French, but knew the orders. I spread my little legs, held my arm up in the air, because being blindfolded went with being tied up. This too I had learned at a young age.

Hands grabbed me and I felt how something stiff was being rubbed against me. I didn’t know the word yet for this part of male anatomy but the feeling of it was familiar to me. I didn’t know exactly what happened. I heard voices, obviously men carrying something.

“Attends, un peu plus bas” (wait, a little lower). I didn’t understand the purpose.

It appeared to be a little table with a glass top. They put the table against the backside of the bed. Pèpère pushed me back on my knees, pushed my little face against the table-leaf, which felt cold, and other hands tied my left and right wrists to the legs of the bed. I was sitting on my knees, my belly and face on the table, unable to move my arms or hands. I couldn’t do anything but stay in that degrading position. Fingers walked over my bottom, penetrated me. I wriggled but it only hurt more. I couldn’t see anything but sensed the lights of a photographer throwing light upon me. I felt the heat, I heard him put a roll of film in his camera and prepare it for use. I knew all these sounds. I knew what they were about to do and tried to float away from this tied-up body. Someone squirted some cold slithery liquid between my buttocks and rubbed it in carefully.

“OK, bring them in,” I heard the man with the Knokke accent say. Panting, one aggressive, nervously barking... Dogs, at least two. Their boss talked with an Antwerp accent.

Tony’s voice commanded them to sit, but they seemed so excited that this didn’t appear to be easy to achieve. Final preparations were made, the lights were put at the right angle, the light intensity was measured. I didn’t know what would happen but tension built up in my stomach. Why these dogs?

“Jimmy, up!” Tony snapped.

I felt the claws from a hairy dog digging into my sides. How he panted in my neck, liquid dropped from his tongue onto my back. I screamed when I felt him penetrate me, how his paws squeezed me, his nails scratched my skin.

“Off!” I yelled, “Take him off!”

And my hands twisted themselves in the tight rough rope that hurt my wrists. The bystanders encouraged the dog, clapped their hands, and spurred it on. My howling was lost in their enthusiastic screaming when the dog let something wet run down along my legs.

My ropes were untied now, they took off my blindfold. I blinked with my eyes against the intense light, got startled when a German shepherd jumped at me. The men laughed, Tony pulled the leash and made the dog lie down.

“Turn around, sit on your hands and knees, little mouse. Show Wolf you pussy.”

I reacted with horror, wanted to crawl away, but one of them kicked me and I did what I was told. I heard how Tony untied the second dog, how his chain hit the floor with a tinkling sound. The shepherd pushed his nose against my buttocks and I freaked out. I turned around very quickly, kicked the dog and crawled to the corner of the room. Now they were really having fun, watching amused how the dog came on to me and wanted to ride me even though I was not in the right position. How Tony eventually whipped me with the end of the leather leash until I sat on my hands and knees again and the dog crawled on top of me.

Filthy! I felt filthy and spoiled. Dog hair stuck to my back, my sides burned from their sharp nails. The photographer took pictures at a professional distance, one after another. Click, click, click. A maddening sound that could be heard clearly in spite of all the mirth and laughter. This was first photo session in a long row with dogs.

Grandma opened the wardrobe with the mirrors. She took the belt off the hook, a dark brown belt of shiny leather, with a copper buckle. She wrapped it around her hand twice. I had to sit on my little knees; the carpet pricked my knees. My arms were stretched, a book on each hand. I was sitting there, naked, like Jesus on the cross. The belt hit my back. I strained the muscles in my arms. I wasn’t allowed to drop the books. The belt hit my back for the second time. Tears rolled down my cheeks, silently, I was too afraid to cry aloud. Once, twice, three times, four...the books trembled in my hands. It was mouse-still in the room, only the swish of the leather through the air could be heard. Yes I know, Grandma, I didn’t polish the copper kettle properly, but I was only five! My little fingers didn’t have enough strength to make the old kettle shine with the big rag and the copper polish. I didn’t have a feeling of injustice but one of guilt and regret. Later at twenty, I would still feel like that little, lonely five-year-old girl that asked Grandma for forgiveness. I would feel again that total solitude that I felt when I undressed, nicely folded my clothes, put them on a chair and sat down on my knees. For many years I would feel how the belt had become the symbol of my submissive obedience and forgiveness. During my therapy I would understand suddenly why I taught Tony how to use the belt. It would be such an overwhelming experience that I would have to sit down a few minutes to recover from the shock. Grandma! She taught me I could be forgiven if I accepted the belt without crying. How atrocious, Grandma! You taught me even to hand

the belt to you goddammit! And I would remember that she only had to snap her fingers to make me take off my sweater and sit down on my knees, like a trained dog. I understood now that homecoming feeling when Tony hit me on the back for the first time with a belt I handed to him. I understood why I taught him! My grandmother drilled me that way. And I would be frightened of the anger surging up in me.

It happened that one abuser bragged of the sexual things he did with me to another abuser. The other one then complained to my grandmother because he apparently hadn't received his money's worth and guess who the culprit was: Me! And again punishment came. By forcing me to watch what they did to other children they put an immense weight on my shoulders. I firmly believed that I was the guilty one. Even the fact that it rained on what was supposed to be a sunny day seemed to be my fault. I would do everything to avoid making mistakes but in their sadistic ways they always found the symbolic stick to hit me. Whatever I did or didn't do I got always punished. If I smiled, wept, begged or hesitated ... punishment. If I provoked or played my part as a child prostitute perfectly, too bad, I got punished because I was a whore. Slowly I was becoming insane because no escape seemed possible. I looked desperately for ways to avoid punishment.

My little parakeet was put in the middle of the room. It twittered happily, unaware of the imminent danger. Terrified, I looked at one abuser then another. My eyes filled with tears, my throat had contracted from despair.

"Tell us what we have to do to you little Ginny", the big guy said, while he was sitting on the bed, relaxed. My grandmother was watching, unmoved.

I told him what he had to do to me, underwent everything I told him to do, played my part in desperation, praying that the little purple parakeet would live. It was my little friend. I talked to it every time I came home, my only comfort in this big lonely house.

And the parakeet lived ... that day. They let it starve to death.

5. Sex, cruelty and videotapes

I remember one night, it must have been in the winter of 1975, I got pulled from my bed by a tall dark figure. Totally disoriented I tottered behind him. The ice-cold stones of the garden path quickly numbed my bare feet. Without saying a word, he pushed me onto the backseat of a car that had been waiting with the engine running and told me to keep lying down. He threw a blanket over me and took off. I didn't have a clue about where we were heading but it took forever.

When the car stopped another man pulled the door open, dragged me out of the car and pushed me up stone stairs that led to a glass door. I had just enough time to see that it was a big building before he pushed me into the entry hall. I finally got dropped in some sort of office, a rather large room with a brown carpet, a dark wooden office desk, a sitting area with an L-shaped corner seat covered with beige fabric, a small seat without armrests, a little table. All this was oriented in such a way it provided a good view of a corner where a double mattress was on the floor. There were lights next to it which, I knew, were from the photographer. About eight people, among them some familiar faces,

were in the sitting area. Three men stood around the mattress: one with a camera, another one was adjusting the lights and a third one was opening a trunk. One glance at the trunk gave me the shivers. I was afraid from the moment I had been pushed into the room, but now the fear became intense. I noticed handcuffs, a whip, candles and other things. A shiny knife lay on top. I took a step back to be closer to the man who had dragged me out of the car. If I had been able to, I would have sunk into the floor from fear. He grabbed me by the shoulders.

“Luc!” the cameraman shouted in the direction of the other door. The young blond man who came in gave me the shivers again. He took a leather cap and pulled it over his head to be unrecognisable on film.

“Take off your nightgown,” he ordered. I hesitantly did what I was ordered to do. Naked in front of the onlookers, small and weak, aware of my vulnerability and unable to turn my eyes away from the knife: that’s how I stood there. A naked little rabbit.

They all sat down, quietly, relaxed – to watch the shooting. A snap of the fingers. The sign that I had to sit down on the mattress, facing the public, my legs spread apart.

“Play with yourself!” I followed the instructions mechanically.

“Off” I lay down. He sat down besides me, asked me what I would like.

“I want something inside of me,” I answered, the way it had been repeated to me so many times.

“What?”

“Something big.”

The game continued. Me, the tiny little six year old girl, told them what they should put in me with an obedient voice, but I wished so much that I could disappear, dissolve.

He pushed a little deeper, I moaned and pulled away for a short moment.

“You are bad, Tink (Tink, from Tinkerbell was a pet name given to me by some of my customers, because I was so little), what do I do with a girl like you?”

“I deserve to be punished,” I swallowed difficultly.

Pain burned inside me, I shrunk mentally, but I couldn’t refuse to play the part and pronounced the words they had forced me to utter so methodically, for several years already. He turned his finger around. I turned my back to the spectators. I swallowed to avoid weeping, tried to flee my body in a hurry.

“How many times shall I hit you? How many lashes do you deserve, Tink?” he asked and I heard a smile in his voice. What should I say? I couldn’t choose a number that was too low, because then he would choose himself, but I didn’t want to get too many lashes... an unsettling choice I had to make in a few seconds.

“Six” I whispered full of fear and I prayed that it were acceptable.

He took the whip and gave me ten lashes; exactly the number I could still count to. I swallowed the pain and the tears that came to my eyes, knowing very well that otherwise I’d had to endure even more pain. They wanted to see fear and pain, but only when commanded. Not a second earlier.

I hated those films, the shootings, the different takes and the men who could use me afterwards. The factory where most of the films were shot was one of the regular places where they took me. For several years they made child porn movies there, with me, with other kids, some of whom died there. Later during my testimony the policemen would

take me back to this place in Zaventem near Brussels. I would give them an accurate description of the interior of the building.

Sometimes, at one or another party, they showed a movie in which I had played. First they used those big reels, years later they moved to Betamax and finally to VHS. I hated that camera, that turned my body into a consumer article in a cold merciless way, raped and displayed my intimacy, confronted me with the things I had to endure. Nothing about my body was kept private during those filming sessions and parties. At these parties children were ordered to urinate with men watching them. They were ordered to masturbate, close-up photos of the most intimate parts were taken, and animals were regularly used for mating. The body of a child was reduced to an object and the fact that it was in pain or fear could only be shown to the abusers when it turned them on. They were penetrated with objects that pushed them beyond every pain limit, that made their lower belly burn and filled it with cramping pains for several days.

And there were lots of parties! I remember I ran to the bathroom of the hotel L'Hirondelle in the Queen Elisabeth Street in Knokke where a party was taking place. I was breathing heavily when I crawled towards the toilet, fighting the urge to throw up. One of the men had orally raped me pushing so deeply in my throat that I had gagged, upon which he had beaten me. After a while however he had found another victim and I had taken advantage of this to flee to the bathroom. But instead of throwing up I had started to cry uncontrollably. I was taken over completely by feelings of panic, fear and helplessness and pushed myself against the cool tiles of the bathtub. The door opened. One of the abusers entered, closed the door and sat down in front of me. I tried to stop crying but the tears kept coming. It looked as if a dike had burst inside me. He caressed my hair, whispered in a soothing way that I was safe now.

"Don't be afraid little girl, I'm with you now..." And he stroked my hair, pulled me close to him. I braced myself at first, afraid to get hit again, but his hands kept caressing me. I cried against his chest and my little eight-year-old body was shaking against his shoulders. I put my little arms around his neck, hesitating, and cuddled up against his body. I allowed all the pain and misery to break loose. I cried as if I would never stop, clung to him like a drowning person. Then his hand went between my legs.

Suddenly, without any warning, he turned me around, made me sit on all fours and raped me. He breathed heavily when he came, pushed me away, zipped his pants and left. I had turned him on by looking to him for consolation and protection.

6. No escape possible

My mother brought me back to hell every Sunday evening, unmoved. How well I remember myself, sitting on the backseat of the car, counting the streetlights going by in a monotonous rhythm, while the fear grew stronger and stronger on the way back to Knokke. My cold grandmother awaited me there and the men could have their way with me. The loneliness crushing down on me, when my mother turned around and pulled the door closed behind her, the gate of my prison, my concentration camp. And the

countdown started. Almost Monday, its Tuesday now, we're halfway. The nearer Friday approached the slower time went by. It seemed as if the evening would never come. Waiting on the doorstep. Counting the red cars, then the blue ones, and the ones with yellow lights. Hope...

Maybe this is the last time. Maybe I won't have to go back, maybe they will take me home for good...

I often cried, didn't want her to leave. I was so terrified to stay behind in that mansion where men could use me as they pleased, with a grandmother who abused me in the most sadistic manner. I didn't let go of my Mom, clung to her sleeve.

"Don't leave Mommy, stay with me," begged the scared little girl.

My mother promised me not to leave, stayed until I fell asleep exhausted, and then drove off. I always woke up when I heard the front door close in a stealthy way. One more broken promise.

My grandmother asked me to come into her bed. She forced me to satisfy her. Carefully, afraid to make even the smallest mistake, I did what she wanted me to. She never showed any emotion, I never knew if I had done good or bad. But I found out very quickly if she was happy. Nothing happened. But more often there were reprisals. Then she put razorblades or pieces of glass in my schoolbag, which could give me mean cuts. Or she beat me until I begged for mercy on my little knees. The worst punishment however was her ability to ignore me. She could go on for weeks in a row, looking straight through me as if I were air. She didn't speak a word until I, driven almost crazy by a feeling of absolute loneliness, begged her to forgive me... again. Then she looked at me with disdain, pushed me away until she agreed to talk to me again.

It was so difficult for a sensitive and openhearted girl like me to live in that house. Because of all that misery I remained a very sensitive child. I yearned for love. I received so little that I often seemed totally empty inside. Her cold, complete lack of affection drove me right into the arms of my abusers. I loved the feeling of leaning against their naked upper body, to feel a little warmth. As a girl of four, five, six years old, I felt so happy if the man gently caressed my hair after the act. It did hurt when they penetrated me, but often I clung to their shoulders, forgot the pain and enjoyed the simple touch. I hopelessly wanted a protector.

7. Freedom in the Canadian Rocky Mountains

It happened in 1977. Suddenly the doorbell rang. My grandmother opened the door and called me at once.

"Your father is here!" she yelled.

I was happily surprised because I usually saw my parents only in the weekends or during the holidays, and thus a visit in the middle of the week was a nice surprise. But the man in the hall was not the father I expected to see. He was not very tall, had green-brown eyes and long dark hair. The jeans he was wearing didn't belong at all in the stiff environment of my grandmother's country house. I looked at him and then asked my grandmother where my father was.

“He is your father,” she said, and she went into the kitchen leaving me alone with this strange man. He smiled at me and said “Hi”. I didn’t speak English at that time but we went for a walk on the beach and somehow we managed to communicate. As if my life weren’t hard enough I found out that he and my mother had an affair in 1967-1968, and that I was the result. His name was Alan Ferrer. He was Canadian. His father was white and his mother was a Beaver Indian. I understood that my mother had contacted him and that she wanted to leave my father and go live with Alan in Canada, taking me with them. He explained to me that my name, Regina, came from the capitol of Saskatchewan. It was clear that he and my mother were convinced that I was his biological child.

Alan worked for “American Car Import”, a company that imported American cars into Europe. Six months of the year he lived in Belgium, visiting importers in different European countries and giving training to mechanics on how to work on American cars. The other six months, during spring and summer, he lived in Canada. He had a cabin somewhere in Alberta I think, but I can’t recall the exact location. But he loved Saskatchewan, with the waving grain like a majestic golden ocean and the horizon surrounding you as far as you could see.

So the three of us left for Canada. We flew into Montreal and then got on the train for the long ride to Regina. I’m not entirely sure if we did the entire trip by train. We might have done part of it by car. We then drove on to Alberta. For three months I found my real roots. I discovered the Canadian Rockies and the endless plains. I’ll never forget the majestic views, the drizzling rain. Canada got locked into my heart forever. For the first time in my life I felt really happy and had a sense of belonging somewhere.

My mother who didn’t like the outdoors stayed at “home” in Alan’s cabin, while he and I went through the Rockies, on horseback. We camped in the mountains, which he knew very well. I learned to speak English and a little bit of Cree. Alan was half Beaver Indian, but I didn’t know if he had family on the Beaver Indian reservation near Saskatoon. He taught me a lot of survival skills that would come in handy later on when I would have to hide from the hunters in Belgium. I knew how to orient my direction, how to sit down wind, so the dogs couldn’t smell me anymore, etc.

No, I didn’t tell him my story, but he sensed it all right. I loved him very much. But my mother wanted easy money and she told him that they could earn a lot with my body. Being a very decent man, he refused to even think about that sort of things. But at the same time his refusal sealed my fate. My mother broke up with Alan and took me back to Belgium, to my grandmother’s where the men were who raped and abused me, where hell started all over again.

After we arrived back in Knokke they burned every photograph, every document, everything that could remind us of Alan. After three months in Canada I spoke English very well, but I was forbidden to pronounce a single English word. I was forced to forget my country, my roots, my only hope for love and understanding, the hope of having a real, caring father.

And I tried to forget. I became very angry with Alan, because he never tried to contact me again. I felt lost and very much alone. And it broke my heart to have lost the country I learned to love so dearly.

But Canada never left my mind. During the times that I was afraid of becoming insane because of the continuous torture and cruelty of my abusers, the memories of the

wilderness and the country gave me the strength to hold on. I could close my eyes and hear the call of the eagle, the howling of the wolves. I even smelled the Canadian mountains again. These memories kept me alive, kept me going for many, many years. I really believe that they were my salvation. They gave me hope. They proved to me that not everything in the world was dark and bad. And I promised myself that someday, somehow, I would go back to Canada. Today I'm nervous about trying to find Alan. I am afraid that my image of him will be shattered by reality. I miss him, but I don't want to take the chance of being rejected or forgotten. I'm not up to it right now. I'd much rather live with a beautiful memory. But my heart is still in Canada and I want to show my children the country that I love, the city that has my name, the place that saved me from going crazy.

8. Back in Knokke

I was running along the beach. My little bare feet hardly touched the sand, water was splashing high, my lips tasted salt. I ran and ran until I couldn't stand the mean stings in my side anymore. I then let myself fall down into the wet sand, rolled over and over, kept lying on the ground and looked up at the clear blue sky where seagulls hovered in the wind like kites without a string.

This was my world.

The surf made a comforting, relaxing sound, I closed my eyes and dissolved into the nature surrounding me. I ruled my world. It was me in control. No people around here, only me and the beach with the wind, the birds and the sound of the rolling waves.

During my scarce free time I wandered around the Zwin and along the beach. I loved the fall and the winter, the empty greyness and the cold, which tickled all your senses. I loved these seasons because most people – those creatures I got so estranged from and whom I distrusted – stopped going to the beach. Summer season was finished and I could wander again, alone without being bothered.

With an insatiable appetite for learning I started reading everything about the birds I saw, the life on the beach and in the Zwin. I loved the feeling of solitude in a land, which appeared to be so teeming with wildlife. This was how I wanted to live. I wanted to become a hermit. All the creatures around here kept at a respectful distance from each other. When you came too close, the birds flew away, although they were used to people. I sometimes dreamt I could make my abusers fly away. In the beautiful Readers' Digest-books my grandmother owned – it looked so much better indeed if her granddaughter read scientific books about nature, instead of some silly cartoons – I learned everything there was to know about barren, remote places. I became fascinated with the Camargue in France, I dreamt about visiting Easter Island, or the gigantic drawings of the Nazca Indians on the desolate plains of Peru. It intrigued me that one could only see these drawings from the air. I saw the marvellous colour pictures of Stonehenge on a foggy day and felt a desire to go there at least once in my life, to see the sun move between the

pillars of that enormous stone calendar surrounded by a quiet green solitude. I wanted to be anywhere... except at my grandmother's place.

But when I was in Ghent during the weekends, there was a strange atmosphere. My parents had become almost strangers to me. They looked old, never played with me and never seemed spontaneously cheerful or energetic. They mostly slept in on Saturday and I roamed about the house, bored. There was hardly anything to do. Everything was filled with china and antiques, my room with its lead-glass window was often too cold to stay in, and burning hot in the summer. And it wasn't cosy at all. The wallpaper was old fashioned with dull green roses on a white background, the furniture was ancient and there was a crucifix hanging from the wall and an image of mother Mary with child. There were toys, yes, but what is a child supposed to do with toys if there is nobody to play with? I waited the entire morning for them both to wake up. But after lunch they took a siesta. And they never talked to each other nor did they talk to me. They felt uneasy, I felt strange – as if I had spent the night at an uncle's or aunt's.

When I got nightmares I sometimes crawled in bed with them. My father then moved to my room, to give me more space. He didn't want to touch me, not with his wife present. Nevertheless I longed for the weekend every week. Because now and then there were hopeful moments, making me believe in a better future. Sometimes the house got lively when the sun's rays came in through the windows and made the house warm and cosy; when my father put a "Middle of the Road" record on the record player and the cheerful sounds of this popular group livened up the atmosphere. I cherished these rare moments of joy. These were the moments that made my life bearable.

There were animals in Ghent. My dog, a crossbreed between a Scottish terrier and a border collie, with pitch black hair and a white bib was my dearest friend. Poffie was always there for me, and I loved to wrap my arms around his neck and to bury my face in his long fur. He was patient and wagged his tail when I hugged him and he followed me around. Poffie was the most beautiful memory from my childhood. If it weren't for him, I would always remember dogs as animals that hurt me because they were trained to do things that couldn't bear the light of day. But he compensated for all those negative feelings. Poffie stayed on my mattress when I had to sleep in the living room with a burning fever, sweating and delirious. As a young child I had one throat infection after another. Nobody had ever considered this as a signal but this was indeed the most powerful physical signal I could produce. It seemed as if only Poffie knew what went on in my head. He stayed with me day and night, didn't want to eat or drink until I could get up again. If a dog could see that I was crying for help, why weren't the people who had to care for me, able to see it?

Sometimes people with children came to visit. I liked to play with them, and I played my role, faking to be a normal little child. If they would have known what I knew! This usually made me so tired that after an hour or two I wanted them to leave. I tried to imitate them, to project myself into their innocent little world, and fortunately I also had the child-alternates who weren't aware of the abuse and got an opportunity to play during those moments. An ingenious system, DIS.

When I was six or seven years old I noticed that kids reacted in a strange way around me. I realized they didn't talk with the voices in their head, maybe they even didn't have other

people in their head they could talk to... and Wise, the alter who was good at solving problems, understood I had to hide my alters from the outside world. The controller came alive. He had to make sure that the alters didn't switch just like that, and came out in the open. He had to ensure that the same alter came out with the same person. Few people noticed that I could switch so terribly fast.

When I got up on Sunday morning and looked at my Samsonite-case I was feeling depressed already. After lunch my mother started packing my clothes. I tried to buy some time, to make every minute last longer in my mind. But it seemed that on Sunday, time always went by much faster. The houses, light poles, villages and meadows that rushed past. The familiar road to the coast, the Knokke railroad-station, the famous Lippens Lane which was named after a former mayor, Mr Lippens, who had been a member of a wealthy family that still has a lot of influence. This felt like my road to prison every week. In the backseat a lonely little girl silently cried for help and forgiveness, behind an indifferent face.

I had to say goodbye all these years, over and over to the only people I could expect any help from. A Mommy and Daddy to whom I was unable to tell what was going on but whom I hoped would notice something was terribly wrong. The disappointment when they brought me to bed at my Grandma's place, the immense pain and emptiness when the door closed behind them. The solitude of a death row inmate, awaiting execution, was resting on the shoulders of a child. What's coming this week? The factory? A party? Rough customers? Pictures? Which prospect was the least threatening? In my head walls were erected to block the memories. It was much better not to think too far ahead.

My grandmother forbade me to allow the men to penetrate my vagina, and held me responsible for it. If she would find out that I went along with this anyway then I was a whore and she would hurt me a lot, she said. As if I had any control of this! The abusers knew very well they weren't allowed to penetrate me, because deflowering a girl could be medically proven, but anal penetration wasn't visible anymore after a few days. With certain little victims they respected this rule but with me they had a demonic pleasure in breaking it. And every time I had to face my grandmother after the act I was devoured by anxiety and fear. I hadn't been able to prevent it, thus it was my fault – and I was scared to death of the reprisals. My grandmother knew very well that I wasn't a virgin anymore, but it was of course an excellent method to make me feel responsible for facts I couldn't control.

I was eight and a half when, one morning, I saw blood in my panties. I was terrified. My breasts had started growing for a couple of months and I got even more estranged from the other kids of my age, who still had little girls' bodies. But the blood scared me to death; I was convinced I was dying. That's it, flashed through my head in a split second; this was God's punishment for all my sins! Trembling with fear I ran to my grandmother. She looked at my panties and slapped me in the face real hard.

"Slut!" she hissed. Did she think I had been deflowered? I don't know but she was angry and nervous at the same time. I was eight and had my period for the first time. The doctor didn't think this was abnormal. It's early he said, that was all and he didn't even touch my body to examine me. My body now developed very quickly into the body of a young adult

woman. The lengthy and frequent sexual abuse and the obligation to reason in a more adult way than was in fact possible at my age must have accelerated my maturation. My brain and hormones must have been stimulated to make this little body, that had been exposed for so long to the cruelty of adult sexual perverts, grow up as soon as possible. From that day I could get pregnant. My mother bought me a book about sex education and that was it. Everything was explained in there, but I became disheartened when I read it. Would I bleed every month now?

To my classmates I seemed to come from Mars. They all still changed clothes together when we went swimming, but I had to hide alone in a little cabin. They stared at my breasts as if they were two giant tumours. I was ashamed of my body. I was convinced they could immediately see what I did with the men and women who took me their parties, simply by looking at my figure. As if God himself had pointed his finger at me and marked me with breasts to show the world what a trollop I was.

But the men thought this maturing body was the ultimate. Never had I been more popular. Most abusers weren't even paedophiles, they just liked to fondle a cute young girl with tits. My breasts really acted like magnets. I was filmed, photographed... a wanted lust object. Maybe this saved my life. I had become the embodiment of their most intimate desires: extremely young but developed the way they liked. There was a problem though, my fertility. They had to use condoms or practice "coitus interruptus".

They did for the first two months, after which their caution slowly decreased. And every month there was that same fear. Was I pregnant, or not? Every time I lost blood I felt a big relief, because as always my grandmother held me personally responsible. If I were pregnant it would prove that I was so perverted as to allow this to happen. I should have been careful!

There was another girl, Anke, who was often brought to the country house to be abused. She was very pretty and had the face of a porcelain doll. She was the only girl my age I felt comfortable with. Anke also lived in Knokke and for a while we were in the same class. I often visited her or we met in the park behind the school. And every once in a while we discussed what happened to us in very general terms. I had seen a lot of girls come and go during my years in Knokke. Some of them came with their parents or father to stay in the guest rooms of the country house, some of them I had to initiate and train. Wasn't it the easiest thing to do, have victims train other victims? Experienced children like me were indeed the perfect trainers; the adults stayed out of reach and didn't have to put a lot of energy into the training.

Anke's father had been training his little daughter from a very young age. Anke said their cupboards were filled with pornographic material and he loved to lend his daughter out. Anke was obliged to work in my grandmother's rooms and she was regularly taken along to sex parties. She was popular because she was so pretty and graceful, a delicate little doll that danced for them and turned them on. Anke was not used for the hard core SM work, it would have been a real shame indeed to damage such a perfect little body and face, but her life wasn't easier than mine. Abuse remains abuse, with or without violence. After all, it's the fear, the emotional stress and the feelings of guilt that are the worst. Violence makes it more painful, not worse.

Anke and I laughed a lot but we were able to share much pain without ever talking about it. Whenever I could, I tried to protect her a little bit from the abusers, however there wasn't a lot I could do. Although I tried hard to divert them, she still had to endure a lot of sexual abuse. One time I managed to prevent her father from raping her, but usually I didn't stand a chance. It was better to close my eyes hoping it would be over quickly, for her and for me. We attended ballet classes together. It was really funny. I looked like a cow compared to her natural grace. My talents were clearly in my rough, stubborn nature – and they appreciated this a lot in SM circles – while she floated through the room as an elegant swan. I particularly liked it when we rode our bikes to ballet school together, the nicest moments of the week. Pushing the pedals real hard, our hair streaming in the wind, racing as if our lives depended upon it. Feeling free for a few moments, rejoicing in her shouts of excitement. Although so much adventure and recklessness was not for a girl like Anke, she did team up with the boisterous tomboy that I was. Together we broke loose from the adult world, its rules and regulations, and just for a short while we could feel how it was to be a child.

9. Cheyenne, my first daughter

I was just ten and knew nothing at all about giving birth, and the accompanying pain. Neither my grandmother nor my parents had told me anything about what it was like, what pains there were etc. I don't know how long I was pregnant when I suddenly felt life inside my belly. I told my grandmother that something was moving inside of me. She immediately put me on a diet and made me wear a corset to keep my belly flat. She told me that if anyone discovered my pregnancy I would be put in a prison for children. I was so afraid that someone might notice my expanding belly because I might never see my Mommy and Daddy again. So I did everything I could to conceal it. And nature works in mysterious ways. Instead of gaining weight I even lost some and my belly didn't get big. My grandmother's doctor wrote a note to the school to exempt me from sport lessons, another problem solved. And people are blind anyway. Nobody saw the torture, nobody noticed the wounds inflicted on me, why would they have noticed a pregnancy that was so well hidden? Very recently, in 2001, French journalists talked to my schoolteacher and asked her if it could be possible that I had been pregnant at nine and a half. She wasn't surprised and said that it could indeed be possible. She didn't intend to make a public statement but she didn't know that the conversation was filmed by a hidden camera. I was shocked when I saw the tape; she believed that I could have been pregnant in 1979 but didn't do anything. If someone had helped me then my daughter would still be alive today.

When the water broke I was fixing the beds in the guestrooms on the third floor, and I was panic-stricken. What did I know? I went downstairs with an uneasy feeling. I was really afraid of Grandma and I hardly dared to say that I lost water. It ran down along my legs and I shuddered at the idea of soiling her wooden floor. I knew how terrible she would find such a thing and how angry she would get.

Grandma was in the kitchen cleaning fish. Even today the smell of fresh fish still reminds me of the fear and pain of childbirth. I told her water came out of me. She didn't say anything, but looked at my legs and wiped her hands off with her apron. She felt inside my panties with her ice-cold fingers and sent me to the bedroom with the explicit order to stay in there.

I crawled onto the bed in a foetal position and started singing softly to keep my fear under control. An hour or so later the first pains came. At first they were not very strong and I walked back and forth in the room. I didn't have the slightest idea how to control the pains and I stopped breathing every time they came. Wrong of course, but how was I supposed to know? I got nervous and scared. That kind of pain was so new to me and I got all kinds of visions about how the baby would be born. I didn't even know how the baby would come out of my body. I felt so incredibly vulnerable and desperately wanted to have an adult person by my side. Then came the men, a baron, Pèpère, two brothers one of them had a glass eye, and a guy dressed in police clothes. They watched me, forced me on the bed and when a pain came up Pèpère forced himself inside of me. I was in total panic. It hurt terribly and I braced myself, which made everything a lot worse. I cried out of pain and nausea. I begged for mercy. But the worst of all was the fear. That choking feeling as if you're slowly being tortured to death is indescribable. I hyperventilated every time one of them entered my vagina, and the pain grew stronger and spread through my entire body. I squeezed the baron's arms very hard. He slapped me in the face, once, twice, three times. Totally unexpectedly the pains grew even stronger and I automatically started pushing. I screamed loudly, I was so scared and it hurt terribly. With all my strength I opposed the forces that took over my body. I cried, called my Mommy, but they just beat me. When the next pain came, one of the brothers put his hand in my vagina and moved it. I yelled. The pain, the fear, the all-embracing panic, it's impossible to describe but very traumatic. When the little head came I was so exhausted I couldn't push anymore. I was so tired. But the pain forced me to and with the last bit of energy I had left in my body I pushed her into this world. This was my little memory of Canada, my Cheyenne.

Several hours later my grandma's doctor showed up to look at me. She could entirely trust him because he was one of my customers. He didn't touch me but gave me some Valium and left again. My little daughter wasn't officially declared to the authorities, she didn't exist. My grandmother let her stay in my room, I breastfed her. This went on for about six weeks until one morning I woke up with an unpleasant feeling, a feeling of mischief and anxiety. Cheyenne? My breasts felt bloated because I had not fed her during the night. I jumped out of bed and went to the little cot in the corner of the room, but before I looked over the wooden side I had the ominous feeling she was gone.

No! No, no, don't do this to me! Cheyenne, please!

I looked at the empty little bed, the sheets were gone and the bare mattress seemed to sneer at my face. My baby had disappeared! I ran to the kitchen where I heard my grandmother singing and I stopped in the doorway.

"Grandma!"

She didn't budge and kept standing with her back towards me. Singing. I raised my voice and she answered coldly: "I never want to hear you talk about this again, and you better not ask any questions. You have to forget about this."

"Where is she, Grandma?"

"Not a word, Regine," she repeated, stressing every word.

I have never known where they took Cheyenne. Since that day, Cheyenne was taboo. But nearly three years later, after I moved to Ghent to live with my parents and my pimp Tony, as will be explained later in this book, I would be taken to the factory in Zaventem where they made child porn movies. That weekend I would be abused, tortured and tormented by several abusers for forty-eight hours. They then would show me a little girl who could have been Cheyenne's age then.

"Don't you recognize her, pussycat? They say that a mother always recognizes her daughter! Look at her! This is your daughter Sweetie Pie, and you can save her life. Do what we ask you to do and we kill you. If you don't we kill her."

"Nooo! Rick, no, don't do it, please don't!"

Rick put a knife in my hand and forced me to put it inside of me. I wanted to let go of the knife, drop it, but he squeezed my fingers around the handle. I bent down to my knees, begged, cried, asked for mercy, to no avail. After he pulled the knife out again, I was "so arrogant" as to loose consciousness, for just a few moments. This was unforgivable. They slaughtered the girl whom they said was my daughter before my own eyes. My fault. I should have been stronger.

In 1979 I had reached the limit of my endurance. After my little daughter's disappearance I started rebelling and became belligerent towards my grandmother. I wanted to leave the country-house even if I had to run away. Every weekend, when my parents came to pick me up in Knokke, I insisted that I wanted to live at home. I felt old, and in fact I was, although my mind was locked in a little kid's body, a kid that didn't really look like a ten year old anymore. Because of my training at the ballet school my belly was flat again, but my breasts were big and full, my face serious and my thoughts anything but childish. I calculated in a determined, mathematical way my chances of fleeing and came to the conclusion that living with my parents was my only realistic possibility. My persistent obstinacy was received very negatively by the family, but I was only fighting for my life. I didn't function anymore in the group of abusers; I could hardly control my anger. Mich and Pèpère hit me to make me obey but I only carried out the orders with visible aversion. What more could they do to me? They killed all my animals, took my child away, I didn't have anything to lose anymore, except my own life. I feared for my life but when I looked into their eyes I got stubborn and determined, letting them feel I didn't want to co-operate easily anymore when they gave me assignments. My grandmother and the abusers, who took me along most often to parties or filming sessions, felt my rebellious spirit and I knew the countdown had started. If I didn't become submissive again quickly, I would disappear.

Ten years old, hardened by the circumstances, I had fights with my parents, forcing them in fact to take up their responsibility. My mother's brother and my cousins disapproved of my behaviour, and so did my father's side of the family. They said I was spoiled rotten. I always kept my distance from them during family get-togethers, greeting them without

affection. I was distrustful and kept contacts to a minimum. They were the opposing party, which I knew very well would choose my grandmother's and parents' side. I felt like an outsider and that's exactly how they treated me. Although some members of the family didn't know what was going on, others did, and they banded together to keep the big secret. Secrets seemed the only bond in my family. They whispered about it but when push came to shove, they all stuck together. Also uncles and aunts accused me. She's spoiled. She doesn't love her parents. She's disturbed, she's insane. Ungrateful bitch! But whom else did I have? Where else could I go if I wanted to flee Knokke?

Shortly after my baby's disappearance I had tried to alarm the principal of my school, the Holy Heart School. She was a nun. I told her I had been threatened with a pistol. This was true, that night I had been forced to satisfy a customer with a pistol held against my head. I had blue spots in my neck after he nearly strangled me. But she didn't seem to realize the seriousness of the situation. I was called a pathological liar, even a danger to the other children. She called my grandmother on the phone and told her what I had said to her, right there in her office with me sitting on a chair in front of her. She looked at me because I could hear parts of the conversation. There was a malicious look in her eyes, as if she enjoyed seeing me shrink in fear and pain.

"Yes, yes madam, that's what she said. Here in front of me! You have threatened her with a pistol!"

"But madam, I agree! You have to take her firmly in hand, absolutely! She's crazy!"

I saw her nod with compassion. Pay attention.

"Well, I feel really sorry for you, such a granddaughter ... this must be hard on you."

My grandmother waited for me at the front door. I entered with lagging steps, to be beaten up, as I had never been before. She had arthritis in her hands, she used to say, but this was certainly not visible that day. What I had done was considered high treason. I then was forced to watch what they did to Anke, and they forced me to participate, to tell them what they should do to her. They tried to break my will, my fighting spirit, my friendship with her. The penalty for breaking silence was harsh, for her as well as for me.

"Did you help Regine with this conspiracy?"

"No sir."

"You did help her, tell me, tell the truth!"

She refused to lie, submissive but stubborn. They tortured her until she confessed. Confessed to something she wasn't involved in at all. I was raving mad, had foam from my mouth. I jumped at Joe, the baron, yelling that he should take me, that it was me who had betrayed them, not her. He pushed me aside smiling and brutally raped Anke.

I then hung on the hook in the attic for hours, so long that I lost every notion of time and space. Naked, bleeding between my legs from being raped with razorblades, the favourite toys of my sadistic group. But nevertheless I couldn't give in to them any longer. While I was hanging there, in the cold, dark attic, the anger in me kept growing. I could understand they wanted to punish me, I had been disobedient and deserved it. I could handle the pain. But it was so dishonest to go after my best friend. She hadn't done anything wrong. She was too damn scared to even budge! She couldn't help that I had been so stupid as to ask for help from that cowardly nun.

I absolutely had to flee to my parents. I could only dream and hope things would be different there. There was a future for me, there, in Ghent. Anke would be safer without me around. Ten years old, coldly calculating, capable of terminating a friendship to help Anke. My mother accepted hesitantly. With a childlike little voice and a sweet little face I threw my arms around her neck. For a while I was the happiest child in the world, a prisoner who saw her liberators waiting in front of the prison gates. My grandmother was furious. The mere fact that I had the audacity to escape her dominance and therefore managed to mobilize my parents to help me, was a terrible shock to her. She tried to convince my mother to leave me in Knokke. My mother seemed to be giving in but I looked her right in the eye. She put up a weak resistance, but my grandmother was the dominant party. But then I told her calmly that I would go to Ghent anyway whether she liked it or not. They looked at me, speechless, my mother to the left holding a cigarette, her lips tight and nervous, my grandmother to the right with steel blue eyes and clenched fists. An ice-cold silence fell. What I didn't know then but discovered years later was that other parents had suspected that something was going on and started talking about it. So one month before the end of the school year I was sent back to Ghent to avoid scandal. When the police would investigate the school records after my testimony late 1996, they wouldn't find a lot of indications about my frequent absences from school. Everything had been thoroughly covered up.

10. Back in Ghent, I meet Tony

I remember how I was sitting on the doorstep, in June 1979, as a ten year old, with my little Samsonite suitcase next to me, waiting for my mother. After all these years the ordeal of living with my grandmother was coming to an end. Today my Mommy was coming to get me for good. My grandmother was infuriated. I was always told I was a bad kid, consequently I was convinced all this anger and hatred were really my fault. People said my grandmother was very strict, but I knew better. I made her angry because I stopped obeying her. I couldn't any longer. Something was snapped inside of me. I couldn't bring up the energy to fulfil her assignments any longer. I pushed my memories far away, locked the door of my mind's wounds and waited patiently for my Mom's arrival. I was being forgiven. I had served my sentence. My Mom and Dad would finally see with their own eyes that I was a good girl. I was going home, they would love me forever and everything would be all right!

But when I got home, there was no welcoming party, only chaos. What should have been the great escape turned out quite differently. The house was dirty. My mother ran a dog grooming business and the dogs were running free and had taken over the place. The kitchen was stacked with dirty dishes. The garden was neglected and overgrown with shrubs and little trees, it was full of junk including an old mouldy sofa. My room had never been re-wallpapered. The same old linoleum, curled around the edges was still on the floor. The old-fashioned bedroom furniture from my mother's brother was still there and so was the double bed with a mattress with springs sticking through. It smelled of

mould and cat-piss. I walked through the house but no one seemed to notice me. My mother worked, my father worked or slept in his seat in front of the TV that was endlessly vomiting rubbish in French. I felt totally lost. It took me a long time before I dared to ask when we would have dinner. They hadn't fed me; they simply forgot I was there! Annoyed, my mother answered that there surely was a can of spaghetti left in the cellar. I was starving, and missed the meals from Knokke, which had always been on time and abundant. It took some effort to find the can. It was under a layer of dust between pots of marmalade that seemed to be three centuries old. I didn't dare to check the expiration date. Next came the impossible task of finding a can-opener and a frying pan in my Mom's kitchen. Finally I ate the food cold because I couldn't get the stove started even after I had removed all the junk from the blackened burners.

And time went by. I took up my role again and played the happy child, maybe it was only to convince myself how happy I was, but it cost me a huge amount of energy. I languished. I saw my mother go to bed with strange men whenever she had the chance. I noticed how empty and cold her relationship with my father was, almost hateful. They never fought though. My father disappeared each time my mother prepared to talk to him, and my mother turned up the TV or the music whenever my father wanted to have a talk with her. It was a cold war, without words. These hostile feelings towards each other also took their toll on me. Neither of them spent a single minute with me. I was a boarder, nothing more.

But I blocked the Knokke period out of my memory, to survive. Although my parents didn't look after me, the months following my move to Ghent gave me the time to recover from the severe traumas I had experienced. I could slowly recover from my physical injuries and settle down emotionally. For hours in a row I sat in the red imitation leather chair in my bedroom, without moving. The vaginal bleedings went on for several more months, sometimes they looked serious, and then they seemed to decrease, to resume at full intensity the next day. I was often unable to move because of the pain in my lower belly. My mother only noticed this once during a dog show. The pain had become almost unbearable but she didn't do anything. Which gave me the feeling again that she thought I was just trying to get attention.

What was pain? I didn't know when physical pain was supposed to be alarming and when it wasn't. I kept going around with the vaginal bleedings, and endured the chronic bellyaches because I figured that if my mother didn't take them seriously they probably weren't. But most of all, I was scared to death of doctors. Several doctors, like my grandmother's doctor and other ones who sometimes collaborated with my abusers, had only treated me to hide my injuries from the outside world. And now I was afraid a doctor would discover my injuries. Imagine a doctor would get to know what I had been doing all those nights! The feelings of guilt and shame, made me avoid going to see a doctor. On top of that I didn't want to be touched again, exposing my intimate parts to an adult. In my world adults always caused pain, physical or psychological but mostly a combination of both. All this was largely sufficient to keep me out of a doctor's office.

I registered in a new school and tried to adapt as well as possible to my new living environment. The physical and emotional neglect, so carefully hidden from the outside world was still bearable to me. But the lack of regular and healthy meals – it frequently happened that I had to live on biscuits or fruit from the little gardens next to the school

for days in a row – and the ongoing loss of blood made me lose consciousness regularly. One day this happened during class. I slid into a black hole and was told afterwards that I had fallen from my chair unconscious. The teacher was startled and wanted to send me to the medical section after I recovered, but I stubbornly refused. Nobody was allowed to know what was wrong with me. I was afraid that my loss of blood would show that I had been a whore before. This was my new life. I wanted to avoid at all cost that my new environment would get to know about my past.

“No!”

I had obviously spoken so firmly that my teacher took a step back.

“But Regina, you need help. Just go see the nurse for a few minutes!”

“No!” I said even more aggressively.

I jumped up to demonstrate how well I was, thereby ignoring my spinning head, and quickly sat down on my chair again. Internally I was shrinking. The other kids were staring at me as still as death. I stared at my desk, uneasily, my fists clenched. Stone, my strong alter ego, had come to the surface, ready to fight if needed. The teacher turned around and never mentioned this incident again. No recording was made of what had happened. I went back home with the feeling that I had been able to save my big secret but it had been a very narrow squeak.

Soon however, my mother started using me as bait to attract her lovers, which made me revert back to my old survival mode, my multiple personalities. To the “normal” outside world I seemed to be a normal child. But every rapist or abuser felt my high vulnerability from miles away. I seemed to be a walking neon advertisement: come, take me, it’s OK! My mother didn’t even have to say it. Her friends swarmed around me like bees around a pot of honey. When I was twelve I had become a kind of ghost. At school I didn’t really mingle with the other kids, they were discovering sex and talked about it in a way that seemed so childish to me. I became a real slob. I hardly washed, my long hair was uncombed and dirty, and my clothes were a collection of dirty old things that used to be my mother’s. I had been living with my parents for almost two years now and my father had only bought new clothes for me two times: a dress for my Holy Communion and a sweater with a horse on it. I used a body warmer as a jacket, even during the winter. I had a pair of worn out sneakers and three panties that I had pinched from my mother’s wardrobe. The girl they used to parade with had grown into a teenager with the body of a young woman. I wasn’t little Goldilocks anymore. They couldn’t put little bows in my hair any longer, nor show me off. So the toy was no longer interesting. These were the circumstances in which I met Tony.

One day I walked listlessly into the room where my mother groomed dogs. Tony sat on the stool in his typical way, his left foot on his right knee. He was a sales representative for Gimpet, a German company of dog grooming products. My mother was leaning against her office desk, holding a glass of wine, her seductress pose as I used to call it.

“Hey Regine, there you are!”

I was a little surprised. My mother? She talked to me? What was coming next? I glanced at the man on the stool. He looked at me with that naughty funny look in his eyes. He had been staring at me all that time.

“This is Tony. Do you know him?”

And I obeyed the code that had been drilled into my mind. I could not know or recognize anybody. So I didn't.

“No.”

But my memory had already identified him. The dogs, their barking and panting.

“Tony, this is Regine,” she said with a voice showing the effects of the wine. “Reginà” I automatically corrected her. It didn't matter, she didn't hear me anyway.

“How old do you think Tony is?” she asked me. I looked into his face and replied: “Forty”.

First mistake. My mother was upset, because I was so impertinent. But he laughed aloud, saying he appreciated my honesty.

“But I am forty!” and he kept laughing. My mother responded that he definitely didn't look forty. The cliché. I sighed at all this comedy. I kept standing in front of him, an obedient child. He caressed my hair, raised my chin. I looked him right in the eyes. I bluffed.

“From now on Tony is your owner,” my mother said. I accepted. It seemed okay to me. One man, one owner, this would be a lot better than having to please so many of my mother's lovers. I looked at him and let my eyes wander across him.

“I will tame you, Sweetie Pie!” he whispered.

“I know,” I whispered back.

I didn't care. He was the first one who really looked at me for more than two minutes. I existed.

“She's dirty,” he said to my mother, without taking his eyes off me. She shrugged her shoulders.

“Go wash her,” she replied.

I sensed the jealous undertone. Even with my back turned towards her I knew how sour her look had to be now. She wanted attention, to be pretty, desirable. He took me by the hand, brought me to the bath, put shampoo and balsam ready and thoroughly washed my hair. It was long and full of knots, but he took his time, washed it, rinsed out the lather, washed it again and massaged the balsam into my hair with patient precision. He rinsed my hair with lukewarm water. My heart came alive slowly. Every touch of his hand on my scalp loosened feelings inside. The contact that he established with me at that very moment would make me follow him unconditionally and slavishly for years. As an experienced psychologist he was laying the foundation. He put me on a little stool, turned on the hair-dryer, which my mother used to dry the dogs, and patiently brushed every knot out of my hair. Half an hour later my hair fell around my face as a golden crown. It felt light and shiny. Tony was happy. I smiled at him, embarrassed. This was the first time that I had been touched in such a pleasant way. I felt protected. I liked being his property.

A few days later he took me out to a movie-theatre. He had told me to take a bath and had washed my hair again. He didn't mention a single time that I was his property, on the contrary. He asked me out, as if we went on a date. So different from those men who just took me. He paid for the tickets; we went inside and sat down holding hands. He talked to me softly, caressed my hair. I felt so much affection for him. He was the first adult who saw me as a person. I completely trusted him and put myself into his hands. The lights

went out and the movie started. He invited me into his arms and I cuddled up to him. I didn't look at him as a lover, oh no. He was a father to me, the big protector a twelve-year-old girl needs. Naïvely and innocently I put my head against his chest. His breathing made a peaceful feeling come over me. I felt so safe. I felt like a daughter who could finally sit on her Daddy's lap after a long absence.

And then his fingertips softly ran over my breast. I felt the touch – and it set off an alarm inside of me - but I tried to ignore it. Desperately I clung to that safe feeling I had felt just before. His fingertips touched my nipple and my body started shivering. That wasn't an accidental contact. My senses sharpened. His hand travelled downwards, resting on my buttocks. Slowly, stealthily he pulled up my skirt. I didn't move, my head lying against his chest. But his breathing wasn't peaceful any longer. His right hand went into my panties, pushed my legs a little apart.

I braced myself clinging to the marvellous illusion from a few minutes earlier. But his fingers, trying to find their way inside dashed every little bit of hope left. He wanted sex and I couldn't give it. I couldn't, I didn't want to! The hands of a man I had put all my trust in couldn't possibly do what had been done to me before! I needed him as a father!

After a while he stopped. He took his arm off me and pushed me upright. Ashamed I pulled down my skirt, disappointed and sad. But at the same time a feeling of guilt was growing inside of me. Who was I to refuse him that? Wasn't he really nice to me? He had taken care of me, smiled at me, given me so much attention! Wasn't it normal that I had to reciprocate? Nothing comes free in this life; my grandmother had drilled into my head. He pulled me outside, ordered me to get into the car and drove off without saying a word. I felt so guilty it almost destroyed me. My eyes were heavy with tears. Would he repudiate me now? He stopped in front of the house. I stayed put, sad, with my head bowed. He looked at me for a few seconds, without any sign of emotion.

"Gina, I understand that you don't want me. That's entirely up to you. I'll find myself another girl and we won't talk about it anymore, okay?"

My heart broke into a thousand pieces. I didn't want to lose him. Worse, I felt I was going to die if he rejected me.

"I'm so sorry Tony, I didn't mean it that way. I was scared!" I tried to control my tears in desperation. He caressed my hair.

"Gina, you got to understand that a grown up man has his needs. What do you want me to do with a girl who behaves like a little kid? Do you understand?"

I nodded in defeat. Of course he was right. I had behaved terribly. He just wanted a little sex. That couldn't be that bad, could it?

"Next time it will be different, Tony, I promise!"

He sighed. "Okay, that's what we'll do: when you feel up to it, you'll give me a call, right? I won't take the initiative anymore. You are responsible... all right?"

I nodded. From now on the responsibility would rest on my shoulders, a perfectly set trap that would discharge him from any guilt. His prey had been caught.

Of course I called him back. Less than three hours after the movie-theatre experience, I was convinced that I was totally guilty. He must have been thrilled when he heard me on the other end of the line. Hesitantly I asked him to give me a second chance, perfectly knowing I would get hurt. He promised me to drop by soon. I felt so uncertain. When was

soon? And how could I get ready for what would come? Soon appeared to be the next day. He was waiting for me at my mother's workplace. I kissed him on the cheek and waited until he judged the time right to leave. I couldn't help being nervous. It was so unlike the first time, when I drove off with him full of joy and illusion. My heart felt so heavy and without my realizing it, a silent resignation had come over me. I had to pay, I was guilty. It didn't even matter of what...

The lights went out. He couldn't wait to touch me. He touched my breasts. I held my breath, shuddering inside. He continued, exactly as the day before. I bit my lip, this wasn't nice at all. The silent sadness settling into my heart was so familiar however, that I stopped thinking of resisting him. Adults, they had hurt me again and again, how could I possibly know there were also other ways? He guided my hand towards his fly and mechanically, without any thinking, I did what he wanted me to do. When it was over, he pulled his hand out of my panties and gave me a hanky to wipe off my fingers. He pulled me up and we found our way out. The film had only started fifteen minutes ago. I was filled with shame trying to imagine what people in the theatre had to be thinking. She satisfied him and now they leave. What a piece of trash! I couldn't understand how he possibly could walk out as if nothing happened. I was ashamed to death. This feeling didn't subside when we were outside in the sun, on the contrary! I realized I was very young. I was twelve years old! What would people think of me? Only whores did what I did at my age. He unlocked his Mercedes and I got in, confused. I was too embarrassed to look at him. He drove for a while until he found a quiet spot to park. A moment of silence. I kept looking at the floor quietly, not able to come to terms with what had happened at the movie-theatre. He stared at me, I could feel it, but I didn't react.

"Gina?"

"Mmm"

This was the only sound I could squeeze through my throat. And then he hit me in the face real hard. I hadn't seen the blow coming so the effect of surprise was enormous. I almost tumbled backward, touched my glowing cheek, dazed, and looked at him. My heart was pounding. I writhed with shame. I must have been real bad, how else could I have deserved such cruel punishment?

"This isn't the way, baby. This isn't jacking-off, it's playing doctor! And I'm too old to waste time on that."

See! I had terribly disappointed him. I was worthless! Too damn stupid to satisfy a man who gave me so much love! I had to overcome the urge to hurt myself. What the hell was wrong with me? Why wasn't I capable of making someone feel good? I cried, not because he had hit me, but because I had failed. He dropped me off at the front door, dashed off and left me behind in total disarray. If I hadn't done such a lousy job, he wouldn't be so angry with me. That's what I really believed!

I sneaked inside and went right to the bathroom. I filled the bath with hot water and slowly descended into it. This was my safe, warm little world, the only thing that could compensate for the lack of love and caring. In here, I could slowly put together the bits and pieces of my heart.

A day went by, and another, and another. The feeling of disarray started eroding, the wait for his return became more prominent. He walked in one afternoon and embraced me in the entry hall. I was so relieved that I put my arms around his neck. O God, how scared

had I been that he would forget me! At once the hit was forgiven and forgotten. The mere fact that I still existed for him made me feel dizzy and elated. My mother was seemingly even more enthusiastic. She circled around him like a cat in heat. He took both of us to the living room where he posted himself in the middle of the sofa. My mother sat down beside him, her skirt pulled up just above her knees. I sat down on the other side, feeling rather uncomfortable.

What I saw then filled me with disgust. He started fondling her and she let him, her eyes closed. He kissed her on the neck. I turned my head away, trying not to shout. I felt hysteria overtaking me. My mother! I felt like throwing up. I tried to slide over to the side hoping to slide away and disappear, invisibly. But this only focused his attention on my presence. He stopped me with one hand and pulled me close to him. Shame and humiliation overwhelmed me. In spite of much worse things that happened to me, this moment remains among my most painful memories. He made love to both of us! I expected her to protest but she didn't. She didn't mind; that was her message to me. And if she didn't think it was bad, the problem obviously had to lie with me. Stop being so difficult and childish, I told myself, and I let them have their way. I tried not to get emotionally involved with what happened and decided that it was high time to act like an adult.

11. Tony becomes the family hero

When my mother introduced me to Tony I should have known, deep in my heart, that the old bad things would happen again. But I was naïve and believed he was different. I craved for just a little human contact. And he picked me up again. We drove back and forth until he finally parked the car on a remote country road. Again I felt the tension build up in me. Submissively I allowed his hand to move under my sweater.

"Close your eyes, pussycat," he whispered.

I put my head against the headrest, turned my head towards the window beside me and closed my eyes. When I would open them again, a little later, I didn't want to look straight into his eyes. He scared me and I feared his reaction.

He stuck his fingers inside of me and I felt my body react to his orders, like a dog getting a new trainer. How can I explain that one's body can react in a way that's so different from what one feels inside? How can I make anyone understand that I didn't like at all what was happening, while my body did what was demanded? And then he opened his pants and pushed my head into his lap. He smelled bad (men are so filthy!) and did what he told me to do. Not with disgust, but with knowledge, a knowledge of which I didn't understand the origin. But the moment he came, I suddenly got caught in a storm of memories of which I didn't grasp the meaning. I got this choking feeling again, the same feeling I got a very long time ago. Desperately I tried to breathe while the effort filled my eyes with tears. I swallowed difficultly while my stomach turned. I suddenly pulled back and sat back in my seat with big scared eyes. I looked at Tony, frightened.

Why? What did I do wrong? I wanted to shout, but I couldn't produce a sound. Tony was furious with my reaction. It was supposed to be fun. And he hit me, again, out of

frustration and disappointment. I winced; convinced it was my fault, lonelier than ever. Would I never be good? Wouldn't I ever become what the adults wanted me to be? He lashed out at me. In a few seconds, from an understanding father figure he turned into a savage brute. And the wilder he got, the more I became convinced my guilt was enormous, bigger than I could understand. A few hours later, he was nice and sweet again towards my mother when he brought me home. He took the glass of wine that she offered him, and they talked, quietly and attentively. I observed them. I saw how my mother touched him in a casual way. How he responded by sliding his fingers over her hands and hips. The way she looked at him with profound admiration, that soft look in her eyes that she never had otherwise, made me feel lonelier than ever. He gave her his sweetest smile. It had to be my fault! Why else would he be so sweet to her and so rude to me?

He now picked me up regularly. He had received the house key and free access to my room. Years later, when questioned by the police, my mother and my father would first categorically deny that Tony had a key of our house. And so would Tony. But they would eventually have to admit. As soon as my father, who didn't seem to know what was going on, had left for work early in the morning, I heard how the front door opened. He first went to my mother. How many times did I hear their moaning in that squeaky bed! I then turned around, nervously, hid my head under my pillow to lock out the noises. No, it wasn't because my mother was having sex. I had know for a long time already that mothers could be sexually active, and not only with their husbands, but I was terrified that he wanted me to join in. And this often happened. My sole defence was to withdraw into myself and hope it wouldn't happen this time. After he did my mother, it was my turn. I let him have his way, but this wasn't enough any longer. I had to fake pleasure, enthusiasm and submission, just like a real geisha. It still took me a few weeks but eventually I knew all of his fantasies. I was happy and fearful when he visited, happy because of the attention and fearful because of the sexual encounter and the frequent abuse afterwards. To cope with these ambivalent feelings, I built a high emotional wall between them. One thing was clear to me; I was very lucky I had to satisfy only one man. It hadn't always been that way.

Tony was lying on my bed. I was sitting up. I had obviously done a good job because no hits had followed. He looked at me, amused, playing with my hair.

"Who fucked you, before I came along?" he suddenly asked with a peremptory tone of voice. The alarm in me went off.

"You're the only one, Tony" a voice different from mine replied. The voice was rougher, more mature. It was Stone, the alter ego who protected me with courage and a fighting spirit.

"You fuck way too good, tell me, what have you done before?"

I looked at him, trying to find an explanation for his sudden curiosity. Distrustful I kept silent. He obviously didn't like that. I saw the look in his eyes change.

"I don't know," I tried bluntly.

He pushed my face down on the bed, quickly pushed his fingers inside of me, while with the other hand he pulled my head backwards by the hair.

“This, my dear, would make any other scream. You don’t even prepare to move. Who fucked you before me? Your Dad?”

In a short flash I saw my father stand in the bathroom. I was waiting on my little knees until... yes, what? I violently shook the memories out of my head, furious.

“No!” I yelled, “I have never been to bed with anyone before!” He hit me hard in the face first and then rammed his fist in my stomach. I doubled up with pain but kept staring at his eyes obstinately.

“I’ll tell you something, bitch. See my fingers? Is there any blood?”

I shook my head.

“You have been deflowered, Regina.” He hit me again. “Who was your man, whore?”

And I felt that urge to shout that it wasn’t my fault, that they forced me, that I didn’t want this. I wanted to make it clear to him that he was the only one, that my faithfulness was unconditional, that I wouldn’t go to bed with anybody else ever again. I wanted to scream but it stayed silent. He kept hitting me, without mercy, until I said what he wanted to hear. “I’m sorry for being a whore...”

What’s a whore? Only then he took me in his arms, soothed me, wiped off my tears. I let him, but my heart was growing into a cold and chilly place, where no room was left for hypocritical words of comfort. Something in me could see right through him, realizing his sympathy was fake. Something in me coldly calculated that if I allowed him to comfort me, it wouldn’t take long before he got bored and would go back downstairs. Something in me threw a temper tantrum releasing all the aggression at the moment he left the room. That something made me cut my arms until the pain reached all my nerves. My anger scared me.

July 1981. It seemed we’d get a hot summer. Tony had become almost a member of the family now. Not only did I accept his authority, my parents thought he was a real hero. Of course he didn’t mind turning my mother against my father even more, by talking to her about all the money my father wasted. He convinced my mother to open her own private bank account. He made sure that my Mom lost the last little bit of trust she had in my father. My father, the stereotype of a henpecked husband, all of a sudden became a dangerous individual who, according to Tony, wanted to destroy my mother, by ruining her financially and undermining her self-respect by ignoring her beauty.

“You have turned into an ordinary woman, Chris,” he whispered into her ear, day after day, “Because he doesn’t give you what you deserve: a glamorous life, nice clothes and a lot of attention!”

She melted because of all that flattery. Tony couldn’t do anything wrong anymore. He had caught that prey too. In the meantime he raped me in many different and complicated ways. He taught me how to strip. He made me get used to vibrators and stuff. He modelled me, moulded me until I accepted just about any sexual act without resisting. I got better and better at it. I started really enjoying all his attention even though sex was the only thing that seemed to matter to him. I had forgotten how an innocent touch felt. He told me I was a natural talent and I took it as a compliment. Was I good enough after all?

He didn’t miss a chance to hit me. But I learned how to cope with this kind of violence. He came much easier, was better and more intensely satisfied if he could hit me first, so I

provoked it to please him. I taught him how to use his belt to hit me, which elevated his libido to unknown heights. It became so totally normal, just a routine to put his belt into his hands and to tease him provocatively. In fact, that belt gave me a comfortable feeling, as if I came home. But because of my different personalities, my emotional survival mechanism, I didn't fully realise that it was my grandmother who taught me the use of the belt, I had blocked this memory.

And I didn't feel lost any longer. The world I grew up in, although still tightly locked away in my subconscious, had come to life again and, boy, I knew the rules pretty well. I knew how to function in there.

It was the period of the very popular yearly "Ghent feasts", a period during which the entire city is transformed into a big party facility. My parents had decided to go out into the city with Tony, his boss and another salesman. The weather was beautiful, a little muggy, but pleasant. I walked a little behind them, a strange dwarf in the big people's world. They laughed, had fun, sang, drank and joked. I stayed at a distance, invisible, and observed the partying people around me, a colourful mix of different types and races. I felt strange. I didn't belong with them, nor did I belong with the group of adults who pulled me along, but I definitely was a human being. We wandered across the Friday Market. They were having so much fun. They embraced each other, seemed perfectly happy. I felt lonely in the middle of the crowd. Then Tony turned around, suddenly remembering that he brought his puppy along. He put his arm around my shoulders. It was OK, nobody noticed it in this crazy crowd. Then he pointed at the salesman a little ahead of us.

"That's my friend, I want you to do something for him."

I didn't say anything, knowing that I'd better wait and see what he'd come up with.

"He's lonely, just divorced, and he desperately needs a little affection!"

"Affection, Tony?" I asked. What's affection? Did I have to hug him and talk to him?

"Sex, baby, he wants to have great sex for once! And you know what? I told him you're the best!"

I froze, looked straight into his eyes. He had to be kidding! But when I saw he remained dead serious I felt my stomach contract. This obviously wasn't a joke.

"Tony...oh God, I can't!" I faltered terrified. I really couldn't do it. Every fibre in my body was protesting.

"Oh you bet you can, Pussycat. And you don't have any choice anyway. Did I ask your permission? I'm telling you to do it!"

I shook my head and tried to convince him that I only wanted to go to bed with him, that he was my friend and that I didn't want to be unfaithful. But the only result was that he hit me in the stomach. I leaned against a wall, dizzy, and I noticed his "friend" was waiting for me, his hands in his pockets. I gazed in desperation at the group that was moving further away from me. I saw how my parents, still singing and laughing, disappeared in the crowd. Mommy! I called her silently but with all the strength in my brain. In my thoughts my hands reached out for her. Mommy, help me! She turned around, smiled at me. She looked, and the group went on, laughing. Mommy?

For many years I'll wake up while I see my mother walk on into the crowd, her head in the air, laughing. For many years I'll wake up with a frozen cry for help on my lips, help she didn't give me.

That day my mother died.

I followed him into an apartment. He came to stand in front of me and started touching me. I looked at him indifferently. This couldn't be true. He urged me to turn him on. He warned me, with a malicious look in his eyes that, if I didn't do my best, he would report this to Tony and "We don't want him to be disappointed, do we, Sweetie Pie?"

Mechanically I unbuttoned his shirt, took it off his shoulders. As a perfectly programmed little robot I undressed him, discovering that by taking the initiative myself, I could control the situation to a certain extent. I could decide myself what would happen. I piped him, the ultimate experience for most men, and then sat down on top of him. I let all the sadness flow out of my body, became an object without feelings. I did what I had to and didn't allow him more time than absolutely necessary to enjoy it.

With an almost programmed skill I made him come, hardly two minutes after penetration. He was still in bed while I was already picking up my clothes. My hands were shaking and I had a hard time making them do what I wanted them to. Only at the third attempt I managed to close my bra. He was watching me, amused, and it really pissed me off.

He then drove me to the "Steendam", from where I ran through the festive crowd, along Saint Jacob's church, to the spot where I had last seen my parents. I started to panic and pushed my way through the crowd towards the Friday Market. They weren't there. I ran in one street, out another, crying, totally disoriented. I didn't know the city very well and felt totally lost in these streets, filled with people, the majority of whom were drunk at this late hour. I bumped into the railing of a bridge, took a deep breath, tried to control the panic and looked around me. I recognized this spot; it wasn't far from the Dog Market! I tried to recall where their cars were parked and how I could get there from where I was. I recognized the tall apartment building, ran towards it because its car park was located high above the street, which provided me with a good lookout. I started looking around, and there was Tony. I ran downstairs, right up to him.

"Tony!" I yelled. I was so relieved because they didn't leave me behind. He gave me a short hug and pushed me away. His mouth smelled of wine and beer, it scared me. When he was drunk, he became even worse than usual, unpredictable and aggressive.

"You slut, you fucked him, didn't you?" he brawled. I stepped backward. "Tony, I don't understand...you wanted me..."

He hit me, without mercy, with all his might right there in the middle of the street.

"Whore!" he shouted.

I ran back, couldn't understand at all how I could possibly have caused such an outburst. Suddenly I didn't care anymore about being obedient or not. I ran, ran, ran, as fast as I could, breaking through the crowd that was slowly dissolving. I ran, blindly, away from the pain and sorrow, away from his wrath, away from the misery that was eating my body. I ran, heard him call my name, but I couldn't stop. I fled right to the spot where I had discovered my parents. They were still nicely chatting with the rest of the company; they most probably hadn't even noticed that their daughter, Tony and the other salesman had disappeared.

My mother was having trouble keeping her balance – too much wine again – and my father thought I was safe with Tony (the nice salesman, the close friend of the family). I nearly bumped into him. He looked at my tearful face, surprised. I gasped for breath, full of fear, shaking on my feet. But instead of asking me what happened, everybody rushed towards Tony who came out of the street, limping.

“Did you hurt yourself?” I heard my mother ask in a concerned voice. And there I was, deeply hurt, alone. Which crime did I commit to be treated like this? For what reason was I nothing more than a shadow? What in God’s name was wrong with me? And for the hundredth time, I got no answer, reinforcing my presumption that I really was a very bad girl.

They made me sit beside Tony in the car, to watch over him. He was drunk, had twisted his ankle chasing me and was in a dreadful temper. I was the one chosen to help him get home safely. He raced through the empty streets at a hundred and eighty kilometres per hour. I was convinced that this was my last ride. But we made it home and my parents helped him get into the house. My mother warmed up some water and I had to help him sit down on the bed. Carefully I pulled off his shoes and socks. His ankle was blue and swollen and I enjoyed it. It was meagre satisfaction but better than nothing. I rubbed ointment on his ankle. My parents wished us goodnight and went to their own bedroom. I undressed, keeping on my T-shirt and sat down on the other bed. I wanted to turn off the light when he ordered me to sit on top of him. I obeyed. Anything was better than to provoke his anger again. He fell asleep, intoxicated, and only several minutes later I could muster up the courage to slide off him. After I had verified that he was really asleep, I sneaked out of the room and filled a bath. In the pitch-dark bathroom I tried to recover from these past hours. I cried silently, allowing the pent-up emotions and tension to escape, until I finally wrapped a towel around me, beat and exhausted. I was totally drained. Silently I crawled into my bed, made a little nest under the blanket and kept watching him for a while. How could someone so cruel sleep so peacefully? Would he ever be able to comprehend how much pain he inflicted on me?

12. Back in the network

Tony was the central figure in our family; he was my lord and master. My parents never protested when he took me upstairs. And just because they acted so normally about it, I supposed all this was in fact normal. In fact the moral standards in my home were very low, if there were any standards at all. Several witnesses will confirm this to the police later. In the early eighties we had a cleaning woman. After a while, in 1982 she got some personal problems. My parents allowed her and her little daughter to stay overnight at our house. I had to give up my room and sleep wherever I could find a spot. Tony liked her a lot. He enjoyed showing off to her by having sex with me in front of her. I hated this. But after three months at our house she suddenly left in a hurry. She would later tell the police that her eighteen-month-old daughter had come to her crying and upset. Obviously Tony had done things to her. When the police would contact the daughter in 1997 she would show panic reactions. Before she could be interrogated seriously the investigating police

team would be thrown out and the cover up operation would be started. This will be explained later in this book.

Tony became my educator and surrogate father. He started bringing friends along. And I quickly learned all the tricks. When he brought someone along, I went upstairs and waited for the man at the bedroom door. I took care of him in my room and only came downstairs after Tony had come up. My parents, my mother particularly, didn't seem to have any objections, on the contrary. She adored all that attention! She beamed as a teenager in love whenever those men complimented her. "You are really a beautiful woman, madam. And so fluent!"

I just was a piece of meat, not worth being looked at except naked. Nobody but me felt the pain of what they did to me. Nobody saw my shame when I collected my clothes for the hundredth and first time, and nobody saw me slowly change into a robot from which human feelings had disappeared. Tony picked me up from school, waiting for me in his car, and drove me to residences all over the country, where customers waited or parties took place. The first time he took me to such a party, it was raining cats and dogs. The windshield wipers went back and forth almost violently. I could only guess where he took me, although I always did my best to remember landmarks, hoping to gain some sort of control over the situation. What gave me the creeps was that I felt totally powerless, like a lamb being led to slaughter. Not knowing what would come made me very insecure. He drove me to a huge white mansion in a remote part of a wood. He drove up to the front door and made me get out. He parked the car a little further and ran back to me. I already stood at the door under a little porch and wasn't getting wet. He rang the bell, the door opened and all of a sudden a sea of warm yellow light swallowed me. Ten people, two of them women, were scattered across the room, cheerfully talking to each other. The women were dressed in semi-transparent negligees; the men wore loose clothes, summer jeans and shirts without sleeves. In spite of the rain it was very hot (it was August) and the heat seemed to be locked in the house. My eyes probed the company and I seemed to know them all. God, from where?

"Hey, Petit Chiot!" (Little puppy) roared a man, and I felt a needle stick right through my heart. It all came together in my head, in my body... This pet name gave me back my past in Knokke, in just a split second. I had received this pet name in Knokke because one day, by keeping my small bitch, which was in heat, on my lap, a Beauceron (big guard dog, specially trained to attack) didn't bother me. It was exactly the opposite; he followed me like a toy-dog. This created an emotional link with the abusers who liked to order him to attack me, and thus the danger was gone.

"Hi Pèpère," I whispered quietly and he laughed very loudly. He didn't mind that I recognized him. Pèpère was one of my old abusers. He had a scar on his knee. I'll find out later that he had played football when he was younger. But he didn't become an important football-player. He became important in other ways. Pain cut through my body, the pain of the recognition, the pain to say his pet name again for the first time since I left Knokke. A crushing feeling came over me.

The cruellest torture is the torture of hope. The hope that I had escaped the tormentors of my early childhood; the hope that my parents, my mother in particular, would take care of me and protect me from those men, haunting me in the dark hours of the night; the hope

of a safer and better existence. When I looked at my “Pépère”, the man who had, since I was two years old, so cruelly raped and abused me, always smiling, that hope crumbled as the sand from the beach that runs through your fingers. It was as if a trap snapped shut.

Until this horrible moment I had been able to lock out reality. But now Tony pushed me back into “the group”, as I used to call the network. I didn’t mind satisfying Tony and loving him when he asked me to, as long as he was the only one. I turned around, looked into his eyes, in a desperate plea to help and protect me. But he looked back at me, cold and indifferent. I read in his eyes that he didn’t intend to do anything against the men and women in the room. And so I turned my face away from him and looked at the group in a non-provocative way. I automatically took up my old survival techniques again. As if there had never been a pause. Time seemed to have wiped out the period between the end of my Knokke period and Tony’s entry into my life. So I accepted my destiny by sitting down on the lap of my old acquaintance and allowing his hand to sneak under my shirt. I was the only child and the abuse went on for hours. They got real drunk and in the end they were only able to rape me with objects. They laughed, boasted, sang. They found a rope, which they made into a lasso. I had to creep on all fours while they tried catching me. The women nearly died from laughing, tottering on their legs, while champagne spilled from their glasses and ran over their hands. My hair was hanging over my shoulders, in front of my face. I could watch them without them realizing it. I felt old, very old, like a wise old tree.

“I don’t ever want to become like them, never!” said an internal voice deadly calm.

“Please help me not to grow into adulthood this way.”

Then the blue hour came.

Between night and morning there is that short period of cobalt-blue light. You only notice it when you look up at the sky at that time. It’s a wonderful colour that moulds everything into a solemn, serene shape. Silhouettes are clearly delineated; trees stand as unreal images, quiet and immobile. When I was led outside I looked up, saw the treetops and was overwhelmed by a great pride. I had survived the night. He drove me home, rhythmically hitting the wheel in time to the music on the radio. “All you need is love”.

Again questions invade my exhausted mind. Why? Why me? What had I done wrong to be disciplined that way? I angrily fought back tears. I didn’t want to whine! I didn’t want to cry! But the pain didn’t go away. I sat down on my knees and violently hit my pillow with my fists. I didn’t cry because I was afraid to. My parents slept in the room next door and I didn’t want to wake them up. What would I tell them? I crawled into the corner of my bed, squeezing my pillow against me, letting tears flow freely, tired of fighting. And then guilt came in, into the fibres of my soul. Oh Daddy, oh Mommy, what did I do wrong to be punished like this? Why don’t you love me and why am I not yet redeemed? I cried, struggling not to yell. I opposed the insanity that was slowly taking over. My impulse was to fetch a knife and to cut myself open entirely, to liberate my soul from this body in which I was trapped. The insane desire to cut my past and my present, which flowed seamlessly into each other, out of my body before they emotionally murdered me. I fought desperation, madness, misery, until I fell asleep, exhausted.

Tony had the habit of leaving me alone in his car while he carried out visits for his new job, advertising consultant at CPB (Cinema Publiciteit België or Cinema Publicity Belgium). He sold films to promote businesses. I then got bored to death and looked outside listlessly, playing drums on the dashboard, and making poems in my head.

*The night opens rooms in my mind
Rooms so dark and full of sorrow
O death, to me please be kind
But I'll still be alive tomorrow*

And when he showed up again he usually drove around aimlessly for a while until he found a remote parking spot. I then let him guide my hand towards his fly and obediently did what he wanted. Then he did his things to me. I tried to relax, the best technique to avoid pain. Sometimes he used objects, sometimes he didn't. When he asked if I enjoyed it, I nodded of course. I knew perfectly what he wanted to hear, see, and feel. I forced my body to react to the movements of his hands. Indeed, if my body didn't react the "right" way, he became aggressive, and I tried to avoid this from happening, every time. "You shall endure everything, Sweetie Pie, and I'll do it until you love it!" he often whispered in my ear.

After the "event", as Tony used to refer to it with his great sense of humour, we normally went to eat something in some little restaurant. He then told me with visible pleasure what would follow afterwards. He loved to announce to me that we were on our way to a party, just to see my reaction. He never told me where we were heading or what was in store for me. He knew well how horrified the thought of it made me. The sense of power he must have had then must have been enormous. I was supposed to listen to his orders and on top of that, to like them. He enjoyed the fear in my eyes, but at the same time it made him angry. He really wanted me to enjoy it. But whatever reaction he saw in my eyes, submission, despair, fear...it was never right. During the parties he punished me, tying me up, playing sadomasochistic games with me, watching how others tortured me with razorblades, whips and other paraphernalia. If there were women present, the situation became even more threatening. The women reacted more cruelly and were meaner to children than the men were. They seemed to be less inhibited to abuse kids. What was driving them? I think mainly anger and a painful inability to give or receive love. They spurred the men to rape and torment us in all imaginable ways. Sometimes they quietly gave instructions, followed obediently by the men – it relieved them from all responsibility – sometimes they yelled hysterically, driving the men out of their mind so they started heavily beating the kids.

We, the Children of Death (that's what the SM-perverts called us), could hardly give each other any support. There was an intense competition among us. Each of us knew he or she had to be the best. Only the best survived and it was better to hit than to be hit. We thus hurt each other to keep ourselves out of harm's way. In really dangerous situations the beast inside of you wakes up, the beast called survival. The closer the fear of death comes to you, the better all your senses function. Your sense of perception becomes almost supernatural and deep inside your brain hums a kind of high voltage. You see better,

smell better, hear and feel better. You smell the sweat of your torturers, the rate of excitement of their instincts. The sharper the smell, the more unpredictable they are. You notice the serenity coming over the evil man who is calculating with his eyes how much energy you have left. You hear his heartbeat, how it goes down as if he goes into trance. You notice his calm glance, rating, evaluating a victim in his thoughts. The beast in you becomes vigilant. You leave the group and pump all your energy in an alert, proud look. "Look, I am here to stay!" The pain disappears, the fear melts away. Your heartbeat decreases and a calm self-confidence determines your actions. Just like the abusers you pick your victim.

The girl with the lank blond hair, she sobs, her eyes towards the floor, her little shoulders are hanging down. Her breathing is fast and shallow. She's the hunted animal, the rabbit that stops running in the middle of the field when the lynx strains its muscles for the final jump. You look at her and kick her with all your might towards the calm man. "It's her you want!"

You hate her because she has to go. You hate her because your mind can influence his. You hate her because you want him to pick her and not you. You become strong, tall, and superior. You look into his eyes "You can have me later, you won't regret to have allowed me to live!" You send the message with your body and attitude, and your eyes. At this very moment, in that dark room with the glass table and the gynaecologist's chair as instruments of torture, in that surrealistic world, you become the wolf, the predator. For a fraction of a minute you are one of them.

When I came home after a party, I couldn't wait a minute to take a bath. I rubbed myself clean violently, also the spots with lash-marks and bruises. I rubbed, fanatically repeating the same movement a thousand times until the water got cold and blood appeared on my skin. Then I crawled to the toilet, pushed my fingers deep in my mouth and threw up. I went on until nothing but some acid foam came out of my throat. Who was I? Where was I? I hit my head against the bathroom wall and I kept hitting until I saw black spots. I hated myself, Oh God, I hated myself so much! I was a beast, a despicable filthy monster, with nothing human left. I wanted to die! Can you hear me? I want to be dead! I cried, crawled into a corner and started rocking back and forth for several hours. But nobody came up the stairs, no matter how much I craved for a pair of arms around me; nobody seemed to care about Ginny the monster.

"Regine!" my mother's voice hovered up the stairs. "Yes" I pushed out of my throat, and to my amazement it sounded pretty normal.

"Come downstairs! There's somebody on the phone for you!"

I crawled upright and looked in the mirror. The childish face with the big green eyes transformed into the face of Stone, the alter ego who protected me and didn't feel pain. Stone would answer the phone from – who else – Tony.

I was the perfect child. I did well at school, without having to make a real effort. I always laughed and used all my talents to function perfectly in the normal world. Regular as a clock, Tony and my mother warned me that, if my real life were discovered, it was me who would be punished, not them. “You’ll go to a juvenile prison. Don’t you know that whores of your kind are severely punished? Prostitution is illegal here in Belgium, but you can’t control your perverse nature, so we don’t have any choice other than taking care of you, Regine...”

This became an almost daily refrain. And the more scared I became of all those traitors and evil people outside my world, the more attached I became to my own environment. They were the “good” people, the people who understood me, who would protect me if anybody would find out who I really was. They would make sure that I was committed to a psychiatric hospital, having me declared ill to keep me out of prison.

“Don’t trust any teacher, student or friend, Regine,” my mother said daily, and Tony nodded with satisfaction, “They’re up to no good with you. You are ill, we know that, but we don’t want them to lock you up.”

Tony grabbed me, fondled my breasts under my sweater.

“Everything you say can be held against you, always remember this, girl!”

They didn’t have to worry; I would never have been capable of finding the right words to tell what happened. But nevertheless I became more suspicious. I was an outsider already but now I secluded myself even more from other people. My fellow classmates could see a girl that was always cheerful but avoided real contact. To most of them I was a strange creature. I knew much more about sex than they did and when I talked about the Indians and my trip to Canada, of which I was forbidden to speak but couldn’t help it, the kids thought I was crazy. My mother didn’t need to worry.

The adults, like the teachers, only saw the part I played. For each teacher I had the right act. They only saw what I wanted them to see; like that everything was fine with me. And boy, was I good at that! For each of the many meetings with the teachers my parents missed, I had a great excuse, for every home assignment that wasn’t ready in time I had a credible explanation. I realized with bitterness that it was so easy to mislead them that I started thinking they liked it! All this increased my isolation and loneliness. I isolated myself from the others whenever I could. I chose my little spot in the middle of nature, away from the playground and when I had some free time at home I wandered around the meadows nearby. There I sat down in the grass, observed the small, crawling creatures, listened to the wind and enjoyed the simple pleasure of being in nature. The beauty of nature and the peaceful feeling offered to me by a quiet little spot, made me settle down, made me feel safe enough to drop my mask. It didn’t matter who or what I was. I loved climbing trees. The world seemed much safer from up there; adults didn’t dare to climb that high. I didn’t have a lot of free time however, I had customers almost every evening, most parties took place during the weekends and Tony regularly picked me up during lunch hour, for his own needs of course. Fortunately he had to sleep and work too and this gave me a little free time.

The relationship with my parents went downhill. The deep trust I used to have in them – I had so many dreams filled with hope about them, when I was still living in Knokke – was totally and irreparably destroyed. I avoided my father whenever I could because he liked me too much when my mother wasn’t around, and a deep hatred grew between my

mother and me. I hated her because she kept involving me in her little sex games with Tony. She hated me because I was a competitor and because she needed me to get Tony into her bed. We never fought openly, but the tension between us was tangible. She was often drunk and I despised the way she, tottering, wanted to seem elegant and intelligent. Her voice sounded split, but nobody but me seemed to notice. I was seemingly the only one who found this irritating. In fact, the only one I still had some kind of relationship with was Tony. Every time he showed up I secretly hoped to meet again with the man who took such good care of my hair in the beginning. One smile was often sufficient to give me that happy feeling. Although I tried to seem tough and cool, I was yearning for a little love, just like any other child. I was always excited when I heard his car. I often ran into the entry hall to greet him when he opened the door. He then smiled at me – I was so faithful! – and I threw my arms around his neck, a little shyly. That little bit of human contact, these few seconds, gave me enough strength to endure long hours of abuse and exploitation.

It was during that period, I think it was October, November 1981, that Tony introduced me to Clo, the girl that would become my “big sister”. My loneliness didn’t only affect me but also Tony. It sure wasn’t good for him to be always seen with me alone, people might raise questions. If he would take me places alone, people might start to think we were lovers, but if he took two girls, he would be regarded as a children’s friend, he thought. So he made me meet Clo at a restaurant one evening. He had called me and asked me to come to the “Count of Egmont”, a well-known restaurant in the centre of Ghent. I had taken the bus and Tony was waiting for me at the entrance. He kissed me superficially and took me inside. At one of the tables a girl taller than me, with brown hair of medium length, was playing with a napkin. She looked up when we were almost at her table. I remember how she raised her eyebrows when she saw Tony with another girl. “Clo, this is...” he had to think for a second “...Reggie!” I timidly extended my hand. She took it with a solid, self-confident handshake. “Hi, I’m Clo,” she said boldly. I replied with something like “Hello” and sat down on the furthest chair. I wasn’t feeling comfortable. Human contact, and certainly a first encounter weren’t my strongest points. Clo and Tony started joking and I quietly observed them. Was she one of Tony’s girls? She had to be, given the way they treated each other. But she didn’t seem to be scared of him or even cautious at any single moment. Never, not even when she called him, laughing, an asshole, did that angry look in his eyes appear. I observed them with growing disbelief and as time went by I started admiring her nerve. I watched amused how she wrapped Tony around her finger like a real pro, how she coquettishly tilted her head and rubbed between his legs with her feet wearing nylons. This really turned him on. Tony took us to his flat in Antwerp. He knew that his wife and his daughter weren’t home. Clo knew exactly what was going to happen, I didn’t but kept all options open. My strategy consisted in not looking too far ahead but guide the present moment towards the smallest risk of danger, by adapting as perfectly as possible. Clo undressed, she was a lot more spontaneous than me, and sat down on the bed. She extended her hand towards me and I walked up close to her. She caressed my cheek and unbuttoned my blouse with the other hand. Tony was leaning against the doorpost, enjoying the spectacle but he didn’t join. I let myself float away, accepted Clo’s guidance and what Tony wanted to see,

enjoying her tenderness and softness. We made love to each other, both totally involved, with a lot of respect for each other's body, a totally new experience for me. I unexpectedly gave up the control I had over my body and abandoned myself to the desire of human and physical contact. It elevated us both to a higher level, even though this was only supposed to be a show to please Tony. We both longed for love, tenderness, and comfort. And what we couldn't find with men we found with each other. Tony seemed to have disappeared. For a short moment that bottomless pit created by the absence of love seemed to be not entirely empty. Love, that we had learned to express only with sex.

Tony sat down on the bed, I looked at Clo in desperation. My mind seemed to refuse to heed the call to satisfy him. Clo gave me a smile, the smile that is burned into my eyes, forever, even after all this years, and concentrated on Tony. After he was satisfied Clo demanded that he take us home, and he did! I had never seen a thing like this. After the event I usually had to help myself going home by train or hitchhiking. But she managed to make him drive us back and he didn't even object. My admiration for her guts increased even more.

"You got to train them, Reggie!" she giggled into my ear.

Clo became my big sister. She and I were opposites. Me, the shy, awaiting little victim and she, the dominant gal who managed to get away with everything. Tony didn't dare contradict her but afterwards took his frustrations out on me. But I didn't care because she shared the suffering and the secret with me. The ability to share this crushing secret with her made up for all of Tony's outbursts. We didn't become just friends. We hardly ever talked about our "normal" life; in fact we didn't have enough energy left for that. We often just sat back to back on a bench in the park, enjoying each other's company, without one of us feeling the need to disturb these heavenly moments with a conversation. What we did talk about was the future. She wanted to escape from her low social background. She wanted a life with lots of money, clothes and other expensive material things. She liked being a prostitute because she imagined she'd make tons of money and she didn't have any hang-ups about it. Sex with men was a common thing for her, what the heck?

I listened patiently to her dreams about a cruise with a rich man, a mansion to live in and a plethora of credit cards to buy all the clothes she wanted. I listened attentively and wished her success in her undertaking with my whole heart. She was fourteen, fifteen years old and reacted with bitterness when I started about love.

"Love doesn't exist Reggie, don't you see that? They always want something from you, but it isn't love they want. Money, cars, mansion, and expensive things: that's love. All the rest is bullshit."

I didn't want to contradict her out of fear of destroying her dream, but I didn't share her opinion. I really believed in love. Not in knights on white horses, but I believed love was more than just sex and money. I sometimes watched young couples, how closely they held hands, how a young mother took her baby out of the baby-carriage and put him against her with so much tenderness. I concluded there was more to life than what I had to go through daily. I had John Denver's records and I believed that, if you were able to sing about life in such a way, there had to be a different kind of people on this earth, different from my parents and my grandmother who were only interested in money. Clo thought this was sentimental nonsense, but it allowed me to forget the abuse. I never succeeded in explaining to her that money doesn't make up for the pain they inflicted on us.

Tony was delighted about our co-operation but warned us not to become too close. We were not supposed to see each other without him knowing, a rule we broke whenever we could, and he forbade us to talk about our parents, friend, hobbies; a rule we respected. Not because of him, but out of fear to jeopardize each other's life.

The feelings Clo and I had for each other went beyond simple friendship. I celebrated my thirteenth birthday with Clo. She bought me sexy underwear and a plush teddy bear, illustrating the contradictions in our little world. I thanked her and we went into the park to drink a bottle of wine. We huddled close together, it was cold and our breath formed little white clouds.

"Reggie, why do you love Tony?" She asked abruptly. I shrugged my shoulders.

"He is a little like a father to me. I wish he were. My father pretends I don't exist!"

She put her head on my shoulder and told me that her Mom and Dad wanted to get a divorce, that she thought her mother totally abandoned her, that her father often got drunk and aggressive.

"They won't impress me with violence anymore. I'll kill Tony if he dares raise his hand to me!"

If Tony flooded her with presents she didn't object to going to bed with men. "In fact, I'm an easy victim for Tony, but I also use him, you see. He buys me lots of things and all I've got to do is screw a man. Easy, isn't it?"

I admired her view of things.

"I'll start my own business later. As soon as I'm eighteen I'll apply for legal emancipation and I'll become a call-girl."

"Call-girl?"

"Reggie, you dummy! Call-girl, prostitute, whore, it's all the same!"

"Clo, are we whores then?"

She laughed at my naivety.

"Do you think Tony sends us to all those men out of charity?"

I didn't start crying. It was difficult to oppose that disgusting thought with wine making my head spin.

"Clo, what a shitty birthday!"

That evening I let myself get drunk slowly and we forgot our misery in each other's arms. This wasn't a romance. We were just two girls trying to convince each other that things weren't really that bad.

I put Clo's underwear in the box on top of my wardrobe, and I fell asleep holding the teddy bear in my arms. Tony forgot my birthday and the next morning when I had a hangover and my head was spinning, he came in and sat down on my bed.

"Hey, do I get a kiss?"

I sat upright, groaning, put my arms around him and kissed him. All of a sudden he pulled out a rose. "Tada! Happy Birthday, girl!"

I hugged him, kissed his cheeks and this made me cry.

"Hey, don't cry, baby!" He wiped off the tears. A moment like this made up for a lot of bad things. I satisfied him full of devotion and when he went inside of me in his rough manner I accepted this as his way of loving. I didn't care about the pain.

But nice songs never last long. Shortly afterwards he started hitting me again. In spite of the fact he made me have sex with other men, he couldn't accept that I was nice and friendly to them. I didn't mind. Now that I knew I was his whore I behaved like one. I wasn't ashamed anymore. I stopped feeling insecure when I seduced a man. Tony had a hard time coping with that. Every time I met him at the movie-theatre he took me to a dark spot inside and there I gave him what he wanted. This kind of reassured my jealous pimp.

The men I had to go to bed with weren't that bad after all. I instinctively sensed what they wanted from me. They gave me a warm smile, a little attention and I played the part they wanted, the beloved daughter, young Lolita, the experienced hooker. They chose I kept control. As long as they didn't hurt me this was bearable. The individual customers enormously contrasted with what I had to endure at the parties. When they were together, adults seemed to be more prone to excess. I knew some of them by name and from time to time I recognized some of them on TV, but it didn't mean a lot to me. I was afraid of them but at the same time adapted to their wishes.

Clo, who used to acting so cool, was as scared of them as me, and often it was me who had to protect her. Clo hated pain. I had specialized in ignoring it and I tried to take on most of the violence. The torture, the SM practices, took an increasing part of my time. My high tolerance for pain wasn't always an advantage, because the abusers found it interesting to test my limits and to push them further. Slowly I started getting weighed down by the terrible abuse I had to endure. Sex became a side issue. It was more important to be able to endure pain. The objects they put inside of me, the increasing violence became an ever-bigger part of my life. Often it seemed like experiments and with every experiment I learned to control my body better. I hated being tied up, the panic that I couldn't escape, the fear of death. Every time it seemed to last longer. When the whip comes down on your back for the first time, you have the impression you're going to die, but after ten lashes you don't feel the rest anymore. In fact these lashes were only the beginning, because then the objects of torture were displayed. A vibrator, a candle, a bottle, a pair of scissors... And you know how your body will be lacerated, how you will have to struggle to breathe, how you will have to fight insanity. You can already feel the pain before they push the scissors inside of you. And time stretches like a rubber band that won't break. Powerless, with hands contorted in handcuffs that are much too tight, you throw your head backwards, while a burning pain devours your lower belly. You can't scream anymore, you can't think, you can't beg. That pain that turns you into a killing machine, because you would do everything, yes everything, to make it stop.

"Will you beat her, if I take it out of you?"

"Yes!"

"You have to really hurt her, will you do that?"

"Yes, o God, yes!"

"You have to hurt her just as badly as what you feel right now. Can you do it?"

"Yes! Yes! Yes! Please yes!"

And with a short pull he jerks it out of your body, pushing the limits of pain even further out. He unties you, puts the object in your hands and pushes you towards the other. The other who will stop your pain, on condition you do it good enough.

I cried after each party, but less long every time. Until one day after so many parties, I came home and kept gazing in front of me in total apathy. I was thirteen and a half and so tormented and fatigued, that I hadn't any energy left to cry. Clo could alleviate my miserable feelings a little, but there was a black void in front of me. I now constantly felt a smarting pain in my underbelly and I had a hard time going to the toilet normally. I bled very often even in between my periods.

14. Eliah, my first son

But in spite of the bleedings I seemed to be pregnant! I didn't tell my parents but I told Tony because he was my owner, my god. My mother knew that I had bleedings but she never took me to a doctor. Tony sometimes did. When they hurt me real bad at a party he called his friend, a neurologist, who would at a later time sign a paper stating that Vero, a girl who died during a sex party, had died from natural causes. But mostly I recovered on my own, without help.

I saw the images of Cheyenne's birth in my mind and got really scared. I hid my belly by wearing wide clothes or tight jeans. I hardly ate anymore and instead of gaining weight it dropped to forty-six kilos. Nobody seemed to notice my pregnancy, except Tony. He threatened me more than he ever did before, warning he would dump me if anyone noticed it. But he had no reason to worry, I exercised my abdominal muscles daily, refused to eat, and eventually my belly stayed within reasonable limits. Only my breasts got bigger, but no man has ever complained about that. I didn't go to gym class anymore. In my school, the Provincial Institute for Commerce and Languages, it was very easy to disappear. They didn't really care that much. The school received government subsidies according to the number of students they had registered. Frequent absences didn't look good so most of the time the absence was not written down.

Every time they abused me I hoped that the baby would die, but miraculously the foetus survived all the attacks. In August 1982 I started getting pains and called Tony, afraid. He picked me up and drove me to a mansion not far from Antwerp. In the meantime labour had really started and the pains had come closer together. A select company of four men was allowed to have sex with me while the spasms in my belly increased, exactly like what they did to me when my first little daughter, Cheyenne, was born. If you realise that a night with a child costs more than a thousand dollars, you can imagine what these eccentric perverts must have paid to do this. An adult woman would never allow this, so they made young girls pregnant and had their "ultimate SM experience" when she had to give birth. I screamed, I couldn't cope anymore with the pain and the panic but they held a knife against my throat when I tried to push them away.

"Do you want us to cut your baby's throat in a few minutes?" one of them threatened. I shook my head and endured.

The labour went on for many hours and Tony got really scared that I might not survive. So he called my grandmother and drove me to her house in panic. This wasn't a pleasant ride at all. But after more than twenty hours of labour I gave birth to a tiny, under-sized

boy. I named him Eliah, a Jewish name, because the torture and death I had witnessed of so many children had made me very sensitive to the Nazi holocaust. In spite of the abuse I was torn only a little and the baby was alive and well. All tension flew away from my body when I touched him. Time seemed to have stopped. Someone took the baby away from me. I could hardly let go but I was too exhausted to resist. I felt totally empty. No life in my belly anymore, my arms were limp, and my tears were stuck somewhere deep inside me. Tony cleaned me up in the shower, gave me a tampon and a glass of milk and let me sleep a couple of hours. Then he quietly woke me up and drove me home. The streetlights raced past us. I looked at the black emptiness outside, incapable to cope with what I went through the hours before. I tried to find the proper words to ask where my little son was but I seemed to have forgotten how to talk. I was not able to turn my head towards my pimp, the man who should have been my child's father. He carried me inside, put me into bed and gave me some Valium, which I swallowed as a good girl. "Baby?" I faltered, weakened. He put his finger on my mouth. "Hush Ginny, you dreamed!"

I swallowed painfully, wanting to oppose his indoctrination, but my brains seemed to have turned into jelly and I couldn't express my despair. I tried to hold him back when he wanted to get up.

"Please?" I managed to utter.

"Ungrateful child, be happy that he wasn't killed in front of your eyes. Go to sleep and don't ever think about it anymore, do you hear me!"

The next morning I was woken up by the irritating noises of my mother's alarm-clock radio. Strange. The earth still turned. I got up, walked to my window with great difficulty, and saw the cars driving down the street, I noticed my neighbour cleaning his windows, I saw two elderly people walk arm in arm. I looked at my wrists, but didn't find the strength to go look for something sharp enough to cut them. I sank to the floor and waited for me to die. It didn't work either.

I couldn't talk to anybody. What could I say? No one would believe me but if they did, I would be even worse off. Life with my parents was impossible, but I couldn't function anywhere else. I was terrified of the idea to be put into a children's institution. My life was chaotic, no regular hours, no dinnertime or rules of any kind. The only law in my life was the law of the strongest. In my group it was black or white. Either you were rewarded, and pain and abuse were kept at a tolerable level, or you were punished. The type of penalty was decided by the adults and often your pets or friends from the group were targeted. My relationship with Clo was exceptional. Most girls (and sometimes boys) really hated each other. When you were chastised because of the fault of another child prostitute you were willing to skin her alive. This increased our isolation and the adults knew that really well. My loneliness grew. People saw a smiling Ginny, but from the moment I was alone, the mask dropped. A week went by, two weeks, three weeks after Eliah's birth. He was probably killed already in a snuff movie in Zaventem or somewhere else. Instead of slowly fading away, the feeling of emptiness increased. I became very quiet, still didn't eat anything, and went into a deep depression. Clo noticed things went wrong. She often watched me full of concern. She was the first to tell Tony to do something to cheer me up.

"Reggie is going to kill herself, Tony!" she yelled at him one evening, full of anger, "Don't you see that, idiot?"

He drove me home. I just stared in front of me. It remained silent in the car the whole way. He looked at me from time to time but didn't say a word.

"What's wrong, Pussycat?" he suddenly asked. I felt the pain reappearing in my heart.

"I want to die," I whispered. Several minutes of silence followed.

"How can I make you happy again?" he asked timidly. I shrugged my shoulders. How would I know?

"Would a horse make you happy?" I shrugged my shoulders for a second time.

He dropped me off at home and as soon as I entered the living room my smile reappeared. I played my part automatically, like a circus clown. I despised myself but couldn't stop acting. Someone else seemed to be pulling the strings. Tony and my mother were together laughing and joking and after a short while I sneaked to my room to make a little nest in my bed. Lately sleeping had become the best way to lock out the world, just like when I lived in Knokke. If you can't flee, sleeping is the best method to make the pain stop for a few hours.

The next day, my mother told me that Tony had asked her to get me a horse. I refused to believe her until she took me with her to a farmer who had a couple of horses in his meadow. A white mare with a grey mane and tail strolled towards me. I pet her and instantly fell in love. I crawled on her back, rode up and down the lane and my heart swelled with pride. For the first time in several weeks, something started to live again inside of me. Every step made me blossom a little. I named her Tasja. She was purchased and moved to a meadow close by. From now on I spent all my free time with her.

The meadow was large and quite remote. I revived. Tasja followed me everywhere I went. I lured her with an apple, taught her to open my backpack and get the apple out. When Tony brought me home at night, I took a bath, put on my shorts and an old T-shirt and rode to my little horse on my bike, so I could see the sun come up there. In that meadow I rediscovered the child that I should have been. But when I closed the gate I left the child behind in the meadow. I became again the girl that had to live up to the adults' expectations. Tony was happy when he noticed my revival. I gained strength. I ate more often, my periods became regular again because I took birth control pills and I gained a few kilos. Eliah slowly became a dim recollection and one morning I realized I didn't in fact know what he looked like anymore. I tried hard to recall his little face but the picture was blurred. It was like ink fading with time. The intense pain I felt the moment they took him away, seemed to have gone far away.

Parts of my true self, like the blissful moments I spent with Tasja, I kept anxiously hidden from the outside world. Inside the network I became increasingly alert. I was still attracted to Tony, but I didn't trust him anymore. I could only trust myself. I started to observe carefully the functioning of the network. I wanted to know who my customers were, why they came to me and why they had been introduced into the group. I was not really interested in them personally, but I wanted to better understand my role. This would help me survive, or at least give me some control of the situation. If I knew why they needed me that much, I could make myself indispensable. I started to look at my life in the jungle (the way I sometimes called the network) as a huge chess game. I learned that you could parry their moves on condition you knew how to play. Most of the victims were poor players. How often had I seen children being tortured all the way until the end, because they hadn't noticed in time that one of the torturers wasn't satisfied? How often

hadn't I seen the weakest fall, because they hadn't made eye contact with their abuser soon enough? And although I had never played chess before, I knew it was mainly a game at which your insight was of crucial importance. I didn't know the name of most of the customers, but I imprinted their faces on my memory. It felt good to know who the enemy was. When I met them at other occasions I pretended not to know them, but I was able in a split second to associate their face with a given situation, which allowed me to be prepared.

The ones I did know by name I considered the most dangerous. They regarded me as a witness and a potential danger to them. It was of the utmost importance to me to play my part as an ignorant child with a lot of conviction. I put their names into my memory, but was very careful never to say their name, even after having heard it a dozen times. I addressed them as "Sir", "Monsieur" or their pet name like "Pépère".

When they asked me what their name was, as they regularly did, I had always "forgotten". Of course this was very much appreciated. And even if a few among them knew it was a game, they counted on me to protect them. They decided how far the pain would go, and when it would stop. They decided on life or death, mercy or punishment. So I idolized them. My abusers weren't common people anymore to me. My functioning was entirely controlled by their moods. I paid attention to every tiny little detail to please them. I thought that only by truly loving them was I able to relate to them so perfectly. My loyalty to them was no lie, because the one thing I could trust upon was that they would always be there. All my attempts to escape from the network had dramatically failed, nobody had helped me and I didn't have any place to go. My life depended on their indulgence and I realized that I needed them, just as water, food and air. That elevated them to a divine status.

At the same time I realized that the victims who didn't manage to establish a relationship with the hard-core users, were eliminated first. I had been lucky. I had become a familiar face to them because I had been around for so long already and I could now take full advantage of that. They knew my name, my skills. I knew what they liked most. These elements were sufficient to establish a relationship with them. I always kissed them when I came in, knowing very well they would use me for their games later on. It seemed as if I had forgotten every time what had happened before or that I at least had forgiven them. I believed that I deserved their abuse. I unconditionally accepted they were always right. Gods are always right.

15. Hunted

I know that the following lines are very controversial and have stirred up a lot of emotions after my testimony in 1996. I would probably not have mentioned the hunts in my book or to journalists if this part of my testimony hadn't been leaked to the press, obviously to ridicule and discredit me. This is one of the reasons why journalists declared me insane, but I don't care what people say about this. I have been part of it, I have seen many children die during these hunts. I have experienced unfathomable fear when they came after me, and I will keep testifying about it. If they want to shut me up they're going

to have to kill me. I invite people who don't believe that the torture of children is big business to some, to read about the 50.000 photos that were seized at the home of Gerrie Ulrich when the Dutch police searched his place in Zandvoort near The Hague in 1998. These photos showed children tortured in indescribable ways. The police also found child order forms specifying what could be done to the child and how much it would cost. Babies were more expensive.

And the "games" went on. Given the fact that many of the abusers were extremely rich and influential, no one would dare to bother them, certainly not the Belgian justice system. This would be clearly demonstrated after the arrest of Marc Dutroux, when all the investigations into the network would be thwarted. This is explained later in this book. And the network was very well organised. The abusers were only limited by their imagination.

It started when I was still living in Knokke, as an "innocent" game invented by some drunken abusers during a party. I must have been about five years old. They wanted to play a game with the children, which was a combination of hide and seek and strip poker. We had to hide and they tried to find us. When a child was found it had to take off a piece of clothing. When the child was totally undressed the abuse started. They liked this very much at first but those people quickly got bored and the abuse became meaner, the rapes harder. The "game" was taken outside into a wood in Knokke, which was owned by some of my abusers. Indeed, when the tourist season was over, Knokke became almost deserted, a ghost town. They organised these hunts two, three times a year, but in Knokke no child was killed.

In 1976, the year of the long hot summer, they wanted more space and more privacy. So they moved the hunts to two castles that were very remote and surrounded by forests. I am not permitted to name the castles here, but I can give you their approximate location. One is located East of Namur and North of Faulx-les-Tombes, the place where the castle was where Michel Nihoul (see further) organised his famous sex orgies for "important people". During those orgies the regular guards of the castle were sent home and the police of the Brussels commune of Etterbeek (Ixelles in French) took over. This has been well documented and was called in the press "The Pink Ballets". The second location was close to the French border, East of the mediaeval city of Bouillon, where the ruins are of the castle of Godfrey of Bouillon. Godfrey is a Belgian national hero because he was one of the leaders of the first Crusade. When the Crusaders came into the Holy Land, the invasion was losing momentum after suffering enormous losses in Asia Minor. But Godfrey and his knights wanted to go on to Jerusalem. Was it sheer luck or were they just good fighters, they captured the Holy City in 1099. Godfrey's younger brother Baldwin became king of Jerusalem. He refused to wear a royal crown in the city where Jesus had worn a thorny crown. How cynical is it that almost in the shadow of the ruins of Godfrey's castle, perverts decided to hunt children.

Several witnesses have confirmed these hunts. People who talked about it have been murdered as is described in the book "The X-Files" (1999) written by three Belgian investigating journalists, Annemie Bulté, Douglas De Coninck, and Marie-Jeanne Van Heeswyck.

It was Pépère who had brought up the idea of a real hunt. He liked to go hunting lions, wildebeests and zebras in South Africa. After a sex party he mentioned that white hunters sometimes hunted young blacks too. He had experienced this kind of hunts as the ultimate kick and wanted to try this out in Belgium with the girls they raped. I was sitting next to him when he spoke about it but I didn't immediately realise that he was serious. It was only after I had seen the first child being killed that I knew that a new phase had started in the way they treated us. But again, to whom could I talk about it? Even today people want to lock me up in a mental institution for saying that these hunts were damn real.

The hunts were generally organised during the official hunting season, which is in October – November, although they sometimes did it during summer too. The number of tourists in the Ardennes is low in the fall and the sound of gunshots is normal in that period of the year. In the area close to Namur the hunters only used crossbows. That was more silent. In the other area East of Bouillon they also used shotguns because the area is very remote. The rules of the hunt were basically the same as in Knokke. The children had to run into the woods and the hunters tried to catch them. At the boundary of the area in which the children had to stay, guards with dogs were posted so no one could run away. If a child got caught it had to take off a piece of clothing and was hunted again. When it was totally naked the hunter who had paid for it could do whatever he wanted with it, depending on the amount of money paid. Usually two sometimes three children were killed during a standard hunt. It was indeed quite expensive to kill a child and sometimes several hunters put money together. And the bodies had to be taken care of too, but they had a very well organised logistic system to make them disappear. I still remember the names of several children who died during those hunts: Sarah, Maude, Tom, Katrien and others. There were several Eastern European girls among the victims. They had been smuggled into Belgium one way or another and nobody would miss them. I have also seen several children of the North African type being killed. And at the end of the hunt there was a big party during which the remaining children got raped and abused.

When I testified about this in 1996, I gave the names of the hunters to the police of course, but also of the model of their crossbows, where they had learned how to use them etc. No one of them has ever been arrested or even interrogated.

I was usually taken to the hunting grounds by Tony, Dani or his best friend, two policemen of an elite unit. I have been trying to figure out why I survived and I'm convinced it is for the same reasons that I survived the other abuse. The network had put a lot of effort in my training and I did my very best to please them and to be "good". I also trained other girls so if they killed me they would have had to replace me, which wasn't very easy to do. But an important reason why I was hard to catch during the hunts was my trip through the Canadian Rockies in 1977, with Alan Ferrer, my biological father. I knew how to sit downwind so the dogs couldn't smell me. Most of the kids when caught, took off their shoes first, I didn't. I started with my sweater and so on and kept my shoes to the last. This way I could run fast until the end.

The following paragraphs describe a hunt in October 1982.

Tony drove me towards the property, which I knew very well. We drove to Dinant and then South towards Bouillon. A little later we drove into the property through a big metal gate, continued along the private road and took a right up a slope, which brought us to one of the buildings on the immense property surrounding to the ominous looking castle with its single tower. All around there were large forests. There was a park with a large pond and rhododendron bushes that stayed green all year round. The hunt took place in the park as usual. It was cold but still bearable, under a low autumn sun. Joe, the baron, one of my normal abusers was leaning against the pavilion, the other men were together in a little group, drinking coffee, laughing. A guard held two Saint Hubert dogs under control. I quickly counted them, approximately ten men and the usual fear settled again in the area around my stomach. It didn't make me feel comfortable at all to have been brought here.

Five girls between ten and sixteen years old stood closely together, flanked by two guards, men who had to prevent us from running away. I quietly calculated my chances to get out of there alive and I got very discouraged. This would be a smooth hunt, there was still too much light outside and the visibility was too good to hide properly. And they looked very serious about what they were going to do.

"Nos petits lapins sont prêts !" (Our little rabbits are ready!) Shouted one of my usual rapists. They all burst out laughing. That group didn't make me feel any better. I looked at Joe, he didn't laugh; he didn't even try to be part of the group. My fear intensified. This was real.

If you're convinced you're going to die, you become calm, resigned, and there isn't much anymore that can throw you off balance. He had come here to kill; the other men didn't matter to me anymore. If he were so emotionless he would do the most damage. I went a little further close to a tree so I could oversee the whole group. The other girls stayed close together until the group of men called us. I didn't react, the other girls did. I stayed put and looked at Joe. He looked at me too, evaluating but calm. He made a short sign to me. I obeyed. It seemed safer to me. He opened his fly and moved his coat a little. I kneeled down in front of him, knowing what he wanted. And perhaps because I was convinced my end was near I acted with just enough provocation to make contact with him. When he judged he had enough, he pushed me away with his hand, just like if he wanted to save me for later. I sat down against a tree that had fallen over, as still as a mouse, waiting. The girls had to run into the wood and every time they caught one she had to take off a piece of clothing. I wanted to get up to join the others but he stopped me. I was surprised.

"Stay with me," he said, shortly. I didn't understand what he really wanted but felt a lot safer with him than with the girls. I didn't have to play. He made me an accomplice by making me find the girls and point out where they were hiding. I did what he asked me to but all the alarm-bells in my head went off. This wasn't right. I didn't want to betray those girls. I refused to think about what else I would have to do. For the first time in my life I wanted to be one of them. I wanted to be the hunted one. Because the responsibility, the feeling of betrayal I had, didn't make me feel good at all. The game went smoothly, the men really enjoyed themselves and I got more scared than ever before. When the girls didn't have any clothes on anymore, they started aiming. They missed intentionally, chased them and laughed at their panic. Joe went behind me, made his rifle ready and

suddenly put it my hands. I groaned. *Don't play with me*, I thought filled with fear, I didn't want this. I wanted out, out, out. I almost started sobbing, but swallowed my tears, out of fear to arouse his anger. For years I had trained myself to keep control and I started breathing from my belly. The panic ebbed away.

"If you miss we'll hunt you, if you hit you will live," he whispered in my ear, softly, almost lovingly. I silently looked at the girl a little further. I gave in and let him help me, let him put my finger around the trigger, push the butt against my shoulder and aim. He waited, concentrated, whispered "maintenant" (now) and forced me to pull the trigger.

I closed my eyes and waited for the hits that would inevitably follow my miss. I heard the shot, shrunk together and felt him reload the evil machine behind my back. I'm going to die, I thought, and the idea gave me a peaceful feeling. But I got a friendly pat on my shoulders. I carefully opened my eyes. I got sick. I looked at him, hoping to keep myself under control, and for a moment it seemed to work, but then I ran away and threw up. And he thought this was funny! I felt so much hatred that I would have easily killed him if I could. But this hatred was replaced by a feeling of horror after a few seconds. If I should hate anyone I should hate myself. I was the one who did it. I stayed down on my knees and started crying, out of control. I was in shock but realized it wasn't over yet. I turned around.

"Bastard, why don't you shoot me! Shoot me, you dirty coward, kill me!"

He walked up to me smiling and hit me right in the face.

"Sois sage, mon petit lapin," (be nice, my little bunny) he said quietly, grabbed me and kissed me on the mouth.

When it was all over they played with me. They raped me but I didn't oppose, felt too much sadness and totally abandoned to still feel any pain. I tried to do what they liked, to play my part, to forget. As always they went on until they lost interest.

16. Children, sex and blackmail

As a child I didn't have second thoughts about being prostituted. It just happened, without questions being raised. In fact I wasn't interested. Neither did I question the secretive atmosphere surrounding it. I was spoon-fed the knowledge that it was strictly forbidden to recognize customers in the streets or during parties. The customers had to make the first move. The big people knew when they could do it, my grandmother always told me and I had to abide by that rule. I knew I couldn't say a word about these things; this was drilled into my head. But the result was that I acquired power over my abusers in spite of myself. Indeed, although I feared them, they feared me too, as long as they weren't abusing me in a group, or were alone with me in my room. Sometimes, during "normal" parties I saw them look at me uncomfortably or try to sneak away nervously. I then put on a real sweet smile. This felt to me like a small victory over the pain they caused me during the nights. I sometimes played with them, by standing close to them on purpose or by "accidentally" bumping into them.

There were of course the abusers who didn't notice me, not during or after the abuse. Those individuals didn't consider me a child or a little person, but rather an object,

nothing more. At a party they looked through me. They were of the sadistic type and fortunately I rarely met them during daily life. I didn't realize at that time, that those abusers used those "normal" parties as a weapon. I was their accomplice, unwittingly, by teasing the customers who were afraid indeed to be discovered and caught. How could I know that we were used not only to please customers, but also to blackmail them? We were supposed to do what we were told, but we shouldn't think. When I got older and was gradually being considered a veteran, I was more frequently taken to normal meetings, receptions, dinner-parties etc, to scare certain customers. When I was eight, nine years old, Mich took me with him already and instructed me to hang around a specific person. I loved to do that. I enjoyed the way they tried to shuffle away, their sometimes-clumsy attempts to stay out of my vicinity. I smiled triumphantly when Mich asked me to go stand next to a customer to make a photo, especially when the customer tried to laugh away his embarrassment and nervously put his limp hand on my shoulder, because he couldn't afford to make a scene in the midst of a party of non-abusers. The looks in the eyes of customer and photographer were quite amusing to me. I shared with them a secret that nobody around us would know about. The customer knew he was trapped, caught in the web of a shrewd glamour boy, and I was a silent witness. Nobody had ever taught me to feel sorry for them.

At night they had been in control, now they were being controlled. I sensed this as small revenge. Unfortunately however, most of them, once they realized they were trapped in the network, started to experiment even more. It didn't put a brake on them; on the contrary, it seemed a stepping-stone towards even more cruelty.

In Brussels in the Avenue Louise there was a mansion with a room equipped with built-in cameras. Even during the seventies, these cameras were so silent that only the people operating them and the child prostitute knew where they were. We were informed because it was our job to position the customer in such a way that he was very visible for the camera lens. The cameras couldn't zoom in or change position because this could be heard. I never knew whether or not the cameras were filming, but I always tried to put the customer in a good position. I felt terrible about it however, because I knew that everything I had to do was captured on film, and this made me feel terribly ashamed. I could imagine that what I had to do had become so common to the camera-people that they weren't interested in me at all. It was of much more importance to them to get the guy who was going to be blackmailed on film in a position that was as compromising as possible.

Before a customer entered the room, Vic, one of the regular camera-operators, inspected the room, cleaned the lens, and tested it on me for a few moments to make sure everything was installed correctly. I understood after a while, that if he did this kind of inspection, actual filming would be done, and if he didn't do it, the sex games wouldn't be filmed. But even then I still tried to put the customer in compromising positions out of fear of punishment. You could never know for sure.

I started to understand the real meaning of the word 'blackmail', a word that was never pronounced in the network, when I was about fourteen years old. I wanted to know, to learn, to understand what my role in the network was, in order to survive. Why was I so important for my pimp and trainers, why did they really need me? Why didn't they just want me to have sex, but also to bait them? Why did I have to put the men in clearly

visible compromising positions? Why did I have to tease them in such a way they lost control, started beating me and brutally raped me? Why was “normal” sex often insufficient? Why did I have to talk to them, during the act, in such a way that it would show clearly on the film, that they knew my age? Why did I even have to lie, telling them I was younger than I really was? I had all these questions inside my head, because I wanted to survive. The fear of being killed motivated me strongly to obey their orders. The more I knew what they needed me for, the better I could adapt, the more perfect I could act.

Over the years I wormed myself into my pimp’s secrets. Sometimes Tony was in a real good mood, after a very profitable day for example. He told me then that I earned him ten to fifteen thousand Belgian franks for half an hour, fifty thousand (approx. eleven hundred dollars) for a day or night, hundred and twenty thousand for a weekend. These amounts made me feel dizzy. Tony laughed when he saw the disbelief on my face. What was a mere hundred thousand franks for men who made a million and more with a single contract? And I understood also why sex was not the most important factor. The contracts signed between the abusers were arranged and discussed, before I went to bed with them, when I was having dinner with them. I was the carrot held in front of the donkey to make him move. It also happened that the parties agreed to sign the contract after the sex. Appetizer or desert, this made no difference to me, to them it was a way to make them keep their promises, unwritten agreements with an enormous binding power.

From the moment one has had sex with a child, one is chained, unless all parties involved keep their mouth shut. And then, nothing tastes sweeter than a child, I once heard from one of the abusers.

Contracts between business and the political world, contracts among business people, cheating with subsidies or permits, the establishing of fake companies, criminal contracts, and illegal arms trade, nothing was impossible. And it always ended with sex and children. When the deal was good, the other party got the services for free. They then were allowed to do all kind of immoral things with one or more children, for free. Pictures were taken, jokingly, to keep both parties to their contract. I’m convinced that these compromising photographs must have abruptly wiped the smile off many men’s faces, when they were discretely, in an envelope, put on their office desks, a long time after the effects of booze and the euphoria were finished.

These “parties” were a nightmare for the kids and as long as the pain and misery were bearable, I kept my eyes and ears open. I knew them all, imprinted their face into my memory, because I wanted them all to appreciate me. I wanted to be the best seductress, the best actress, and although I wasn’t the prettiest girl, I was more popular than the more beautiful victims. I did exactly what they wanted. I pretended to like their advances, I fought back when they wanted me to, I played their games. That way I remained important and didn’t end up in the final stage. Because hidden very well from the outside world, children did die at the request of customers who could afford the money. The child prostitutes knew this very well and the longer they had been part of the network, the more threatening it became. The risk that children would break the code of silence increased with their age indeed.

Suppose that someone at one of these parties was dissatisfied with your performance, got mad and threw money on the table or refused to sign a contract. Then immediately

measures were taken to allow the gentleman his little revenge. The worst torture was the unpredictability. Every time an abuser stopped smiling, my heart missed a beat. Every little mistake could be fatal, even if you were very popular. Money decided. If someone wanted you dead, he just paid. He became the one who decided, not your pimp or whoever.

The men got their ideas from the child porn films that were presented at these parties. It sometimes looked like a James Bond situation. While the men had fun and were making lots of noise, the pimps or their helpers filmed them and photographed them without them knowing. The pimps also used different tactics. They invited a person who could be useful to them. They took him out for dinner and, after he had absorbed a considerable amount of liquor, wine etc...proposed to him to join them for a party. Men from the upper class are used to visiting prostitutes or having them offered to them. They usually knew that something of that kind would follow, and the whores they met when they came in were girls between sixteen and eighteen years old. More booze and cocaine were served for an appropriate atmosphere. And only after a while, the "prey" was led to a room where a young girl was waiting, a girl like me. I had to get them into the bed, if I failed reprisals followed. Everything was put on film in secret and used as means of coercion, if needed. Most men probably realized the mess they were in when it was too late.

Men were introduced into the network by colleagues, friends or even family members, slowly and carefully, or abruptly after a party. Fathers sometimes brought along their sons. Step by step, customers who at first were very careful in bed with me were pushed to become more violent. I was ordered to facilitate this because the combination of sex and violence is extremely compromising. No offender could afford to break silence after he had done this. They became partners in crime with strong ties to each other. None of them was inclined to conclude contracts with outsiders. The penalty for this could be extremely high but that was way over my head. I had to do a job. The secrets and intrigues only interested me when my life was at stake. It all happened unknown to the child victims and that was a good thing. We already had enough to worry about.

17. Motherly love

Where does pain end? What is the limit of what a person can handle? I don't know but the most painful was my mother's treason. She drove me to the places that Tony had told her, dropped me off at the front door, talked to the abusers, while some of them abused me in the bedroom, or even right under her nose. I was filled with shame but it left her cold. She had been abused as a child herself and I was an unwanted child and a competitor for Tony. So she used me for the only thing she was really interested in: money. And my parents made lots of money with me. And every time I died a little more. Because I couldn't scream, weep or feel. She accepted one more glass of wine. She watched as one of the men took my blouse off my shoulders. Horrified I looked at the floor. I couldn't bear the thought of her watching them having sex with me, so she would see how bad I was.

“Don’t look Mommy,” I told her, frightened, but she laughed at me.

“Don’t act so shy, I know you like this!” she joked and watched how the man made me bend forward. O Mommy, my Mommy, why? Have I really done so much wrong? Mommy why don’t you help me? But she never helped; instead she watched quietly, let it happen. Often she got to decide who could take me first, and she enjoyed this responsibility. She gave me away, applauded when they put me on the table. No, it wasn’t the men who were hard to cope with. The hardest part was the journey back home with my mother. Finding the courage to look her in the face took a superhuman effort.

But rather than repudiate her as my Mommy, I made myself responsible for her behaviour. Even before she had parked the car in front of our house, I had convinced myself that she couldn’t treat me in any other way. I had to be the cause of it. I couldn’t imagine there might be a different reason. The more she abused me, the more I forgave her. Forgiving her and accepting the blame myself, made what she did less bad. My mother also reported to Tony what I had done during his absence. If I hadn’t been nice enough to her, although she was seldom sober enough to have a clear judgment on this, I got severely punished. Then I had to satisfy her sexually and, dear me, if I didn’t do it exactly the way she wanted. One day Tony slaughtered my little bunny that I got from him as a present a few months before, to teach me a lesson. With malicious pleasure, she told him how I had refused to serve her yet another glass of wine, and he let her choose which punishment I deserved for this.

“She’s got to know her place,” she said, “You take care of that.”

The same week he took me to his flat. Three younger men in their early thirties were awaiting us. He pushed me into the group and ordered me to take off my clothes. I looked at him, frightened. He watched me, his hands in his pockets and started counting “One, two, three...” and I undressed, knowing very well that at “Five” hell would break loose.

“I bet you’ll show some more respect for your mother real soon, sweetheart,” he told me, smiling. “You’ll soon kiss her feet when she asks you to” and he nodded at the three guys they could have me.

By the time he brought me home again, I realized I deserved the punishment. I was convinced that Tony and my mother treated me the right way. I was the bad one, not them. Nobody deserved such an inhuman punishment unless they were really bad.

18. Clo’s death

Elijah had become a distant memory, and because the abuse became so frequent, I didn’t have a lot of time left to think about anything else. But around November 1982 I really started to miss Clo. Earlier in the year we had spent a lot of hours, when we had managed to escape, in the Boudewijnstreet, an area close to the railway station where people went to have a good time. We could let off steam in the hard-rock cafés and tried to get rid of all the pent-up feelings of aggression, pain and fear. Most of the youngsters who came there were in serious trouble and it had become a kind of refuge. There was hardly any talking but we all got caught up in loud music and created our own secret world.

Because Clo and I never agreed upon a specific place and time but always managed to find each other at our fixed spots, I started getting suspicious when I hadn't seen her for two months. Nobody had seen her, not even Gilles, one of Clo's regular boyfriends. Would she have run away? Would she... but before my mind could go any further, I blocked the thought. Clo certainly wouldn't die; she was much too strong for that. I preferred to believe she fled.

Then came an important party. Many of my main rapists were present, drinking champagne and expensive wine. There was a lingerie show with younger girls. I knew many of them from the network. And there was Clo, with an older man, and she made an effort to smile when he undid her bra. I wanted to go to her but Tony stopped me.

"Leave her alone," he snapped. I looked at him surprised.

"It's Clo! I haven't seen her for so long!"

He held my arm in his iron grip.

"Reggie, don't disobey me now! Clo isn't clean anymore, leave her alone!"

"What?"

"She's an angel, and if you want the same, you should absolutely go see her right now!" he whispered waspishly. I looked at her and felt an almost untameable urge to grab her and run away with her. Because when they called you an angel, you were going to die. They never made an exception. Little angels died!

When we saw each other we were not allowed to have any contact anymore. I kept visiting our cafés but I never saw her again. Only at parties and always with the same old man, I could still catch a glimpse of her. Clo seemed lonelier than ever. She pretended to be strong but I knew her body language too well to believe in her fake sturdiness. I couldn't do anything to help her, except try to divert the attention when, at the parties, they treated her too roughly. Every offender knew she had reached the "final stage". After a few months I understood why they still kept her alive. Clo was pregnant.

A number of hard-core abusers got a kick from pregnant girls. Tony had such a high demand for pregnant girls that he forbade me to take birth-control pills. He knew from experience that I was able to perfectly hide my pregnancy and that I gave birth without complications. They kept Clo alive because she could still make them a lot of money for a couple of months. Sure it was cruel, but I had been in the inner circle long enough to realize that.

One day Tony picked me up from school in a hasty manner. We took the old road towards the coast. After a while we left it and followed a winding little road. Tony was angry. I knew something was going on but I didn't have the nerve to ask. We finally stopped in Waarschoot at a big bungalow, surrounded by a garden. There was some sort of moat around most of the property. Several guests were already present, a woman and a man whom I recognized from a bar, I think it was called Co-Cli-Co, where parties were organized, and a few abusers from my regular environment i.e. Pèpère, Michael the lawyer from Brussels and Paul a local politician.

Tony pushed me through the living room, through the kitchen into the hallway. There was a row of doors and behind the first door to the left, there was Clo lying on a bed. She was bathed in sweat, pale and she hardly reacted. She obviously had been in labour for a long time. She was clearly exhausted, was losing lots of blood and suffering agonizing pain. I stayed at her side for hours, kept her awake, helped her go through the pains. But it didn't

go well. In the meantime they did to her what they had done to me before. They abused her and raped her with objects.

Clo had problems coping with the pain. She screamed aloud, and they ordered me to hold her and make her shut up. They said they would torture her even more if I didn't succeed in keeping her quiet. Crying, begging for mercy, I held her, my hand on her mouth. The more she screamed, the crueller they became. After a seemingly endless period they finally stopped and left us alone. Clo couldn't handle it anymore. She was constantly hovering between alertness and unconsciousness and the baby wouldn't come. I mustered up all my courage and sneaked into the living room where the honourable company, were having a sociable conversation.

"Tony, Clo is really sick. She needs a doctor!"

He hit me, irritated that I dared to disturb him during an interesting discussion and kicked me back to the room. "I want you to finish this quickly, you bitch! Or I'll cut it out myself!"

He slammed the door closed and locked it with the key.

"No, Tony, don't!"

I yelled, hit the door, kicked it, and shouted that he needed to get a doctor. I started ramming the door, allowed the anger to escape but felt rage grow inside of me. How could they abandon Clo like this? I shouted at Clo that she had to keep fighting, that she couldn't die. I ran towards the bed. Clo was pale, her lips were blue and she had blue circles under her eyes. I let my tears flow freely, rocked her with my arms, started singing to wake her up, my entire body shaking. If I kept wishing hard enough that she'd stay alive, she would. I helped her push the baby out of her belly and shouted at her that it was over.

"Clo, it's all over girl, you may wake up now!"

Clo didn't wake up. I sat at the head of the bed, put her head into my lap and slowly moved back and forth. I refused to believe that she was gone. I didn't know what they did with the baby, I lived inside a small circle with Clo as the centre. If I kept her in my arms, she had to wake up eventually. Tony touched me, wanted to pull me off the bed. I hit his arm.

"Leave me alone, I have to wake up Clo!"

He got nasty, wanted to pull me off violently. I hit him; there was an insane rage in my eyes. I held Clo's head in my arms very tightly. No, I wouldn't let go! Another man came to Tony's assistance, but I kicked him right in the crotch. He fell to the floor and was out for a while. Tony got into frenzy and dragged me off the bed. I threw a fit, yelled hysterically that I had to hold Clo, hit and kicked everything within reach. He finally kicked me into the hallway, where I kept screaming. I tried to get up and wanted to run back into the room. They needed two men to restrain me, drove me into a corner and kicked me repeatedly until I lay on the floor crying. Tony started shouting again now that I was giving up.

"Don't you dare get up, stupid bitch, don't you dare! It's your fault, do you hear me! You let Clo die, so don't you dare to get up, 'cause I'll kill you!"

These words still resound in my head today. It was my fault. I let go of Clo, and Clo died. I wasn't able to help her. And I cried my last tears.

The company wasn't really bothered by Clo's death, accidents happen. Tony had disappeared and would resurface a few hours later, but the rest of them took me along to a Chinese restaurant in Brugge, where we had dinner and then the politician said: "Let's go to Cecile!"

And we all went to Knokke to my grandmother's place where I got gang-raped. I was used to being raped but just after the death of my best friend such a thing was unbearable.

A short time after Clo's death I started to wander.

One time I ended up at the railroad installations in the harbour of Ghent. As if hypnotized I looked at the tracks and considered jumping under the first oncoming train. My feelings were a heavy dead weight on my heart. I couldn't cry anymore, I couldn't live anymore.

But suddenly Clo seemed so near.

"I will tell, Clo" I said loudly.

I sometimes wondered how long I could still defy death. I often felt guilty for staying alive while others dropped out. I didn't want to get attached to the other children anymore, out of fear of having to endure another shock like Clo's death. With Clo gone, I only had my abusers left, and thus followed them obediently. I still cared for Tony in spite of everything, missed him when he wasn't around, felt safe when he was with me. They became my family because I understood their world. They made all the decisions. The better I adapted to their idiosyncrasies, the more privileges I got. I belonged with them. I felt at home in the network. The little victims hated me. I hurt them. How in the world could they know that I hurt them for their own protection? I clearly knew by now that I wasn't able to help them. I could alleviate their pain, and the only way was to teach them everything the abusers had taught me. The better they played the game, the less punishment and reprisals would follow.

So I taught them to increase their tolerance for pain, to relax when objects were pushed inside of them... But not everyone appreciated my efforts. I couldn't explain to them that the pain I inflicted upon them was nothing compared to what my abusers could do to them. When the abusers were about to go too far at a party, I tried to divert their attention, but I had to do this in a very subtle way. If Tony noticed that I was protecting someone, they all concentrated on the poor kid. It could be very dangerous to be my friend. So I avoided being liked. Kids who hated me were less likely to be thrown into the hard core. One of the girls, who would later testify to the police at Neufchâteau (the judicial department that caught Marc Dutroux), happened to meet me after my story had been published in the press. She told me that when she first saw my face again she had become very angry, because I had hurt her. I hugged her and after all these years I could finally tell her how sorry I was. This was one of the most beautiful moments in my life.

I couldn't get over Clo's death. I couldn't accept she wasn't there for me anymore, but I was unable to cope with the fact she had died. I suppressed her death. I forced myself to believe that she had escaped. The truth got buried deep inside my memory; the lie made life bearable. But life went on. Months passed. I learned again how to laugh. My life seemed to be a collection of small closets. In one I was a schoolgirl, in another I was a rebel, who often took a day off at school and revolted against adults. I did this indeed

although they will later try to prove that I didn't miss school a lot because it was not marked in the attendance registers. But there were more than enough ways to get around this as I said before. In yet another closet I was the daughter, the whore, the little slave. Every closet was carefully secluded from the other ones. I knew very well, most youngsters didn't live this way, but I shuddered at the idea of living in a normal family. I started realizing that I had come to a point where I could only escape by living on my own. I would never be able to adapt to a family life where you had to be home at eight and in bed at ten.

The summer holiday of 1983 brought some relief. Tony took it a little easier and most of my free time I spent with my horse. My belly had become a little round but nobody noticed because I wore tight clothes. This was my fourth pregnancy. Indeed after Eliah I had been pregnant again for a short while but I had suffered a miscarriage. A friend from school knew about it and would testify about this to the police later. And this would not be the only official record of my teenage pregnancies. The four children I brought into this world during my years of abuse have never officially existed and people would always think that I made it all up. I don't blame them, it is unbelievable indeed.

My horse did great and I mostly rode it bareback. The contact of my bare legs and toes with her warm skin was the only physical contact that could give me some comfort. With her I could tune out all my other lives. This summer, as I would later understand, was to become the lull before the storm. Looking back, it seemed as if my abusers, Tony included, whom I only regarded as a pimp and not as a father anymore, had prepared for my last turbulent year in the network.

19. Tiu and Chrissy

My third child was born begin September 1983. I called him Tiu, an American Indian name. Tony didn't appreciate him because he was a boy again. Girls brought in much more money. I simply remarked that it was the father who determined the gender. He didn't like my sarcastic comment at all. My little son was not officially declared as usual. He stayed at home in my bedroom and I tried to take care of him as well as I could, which was very difficult. In order to keep him quiet, my mother often gave him some of the cough syrup she used for her emphysema - she had become a chain smoker - and sometimes she gave him valium. She also hired a young woman, Carine, a junkie who just had a baby herself. I went to school and started noticing with some fake pleasure that I didn't have two, but ten lives. But my baby was alive and I was filled with hope that maybe he could stay. Maybe they wouldn't take him from me this time. I tried hard not to make any mistakes. Tiu was my weak spot, the smallest error could be fatal for him. So many children were indeed sacrificed to make films, I recalled what had happened to Cheyenne, and I wanted to protect him at all cost.

Tony often took me to Brussels where Mich was allowed to use a flat in the Theo Van Pé Street. He made photographs there that were put into an album that was used to let the potential customers pick their girls. The album had to look totally normal because it was lent out a lot. Nothing should indicate that the girls were part of a children's prostitution

network. So there were also pictures of houses, the sea and other nonsense between the pictures of the girls, and of a few boys too.

The flat wasn't far from the highway and Mich and Tony used to meet there often. Half September I saw Chrissie there for the first time. She was obviously in love with Mich, and I recognized the trap she was going to get caught in. A long time ago, centuries ago, Tony had made me dependant on him the exact same way. Mich gave her lots of attention; he was really her prince charming. I closed myself off. I didn't want to know how he would eventually catch his prey. She was older than me. But she was a real teenager, fond of experiments, full of trust in adults, convinced nothing bad could happen to her. I really didn't feel like destroying her dream.

She was being reeled in slowly, by an experienced offender who knew damn well how to get her into his net. He made her dependent upon his love and then started making demands.

"I'm a grown up man, honey, you'll have to do more than just smile at me!"

Oh, I knew the routine so well and it made me sick. She finally accepted because she didn't want to lose him. Of course not. Those men were pros, they knew exactly when to come up with their demands. Chrissie was caught before she realized it.

I saw it coming, and my suspicion proved to be correct a little later. My abusers brought me into the game to "loosen her a bit". I hated this because I would have to talk to her and after having lost Clo I was scared to death to build up a new relationship with a girl from the network. I stayed distant and cold at first. We didn't get along, I was an experienced girl and I looked down on her, the innocent naïve kid. In fact, deep inside my heart I was jealous of the girl she still was then. The loving looks she gave Mich reminded me in a painful way, of my first weeks with Tony. And somehow I was afraid that it might really last for her. But when Mich made her have sex with me in a very subtle way, I understood that his attention for her was totally fake. This was the first time that I had to bite my tongue not to warn her about the hornet's nest she was getting herself in to.

"Show what you can do, honey. Make an old man happy!" He used his classical lines, in his own stereotype manner. And she gave in, but I saw in her eyes that she hesitated. She was hurt.

"You don't have to, sweetie, I'm not asking you to do anything you don't want to. But I know you're not childish. You're almost an adult woman, you can do it!"

This was a great trap. She took her clothes off, hesitating, ashamed, but she decided it all herself, at least that was the way it seemed.

"All right," I thought sadly, "From now on you're not going to say anything to anybody anymore. You'll keep your mouth shut!"

I saw her again from time to time. She tried to establish some sort of contact with me in a timid way. I heard that she had participated at a youth camp not long ago. When she was with the other girls I heard them talk about U2 and George Michael. I didn't know if this was her favourite music or not. To me these were all things that came from a strange world. I couldn't understand why such banal things seemed so important to her. I listened with one ear and didn't pay any more attention than was strictly required.

One evening I was sitting in the Brussels flat when she and Mich came in. She heard me softly sing a song from Pink Floyd's "The Wall". She had never heard the music before and I translated part of the lyrics. I noticed for the first time that she was becoming more

serious and in spite of my efforts to close off my feelings, it hurt me to see this. On the one hand, a young girl like her could easily be fascinated by the way the people from my group related to each other. The extravagance, the fact of not being a prisoner of a steady job with regular working hours, the way money was spent... she felt part of a select company. Mich was an excellent storyteller; he could captivate an audience for hours on end, narrating anecdotes from his life. He owned of private radio station, something she found really terrific, and he took advantage of this as much as he could. She had really fallen in love with him, maybe as desperately as I used to love Tony in the beginning. He was her friend, experienced lover, and father figure.

On the other hand she was afraid of his demands. The sexual excesses with other girls and men were hard to stomach. Chrissie felt trapped. And, more important, she felt she was responsible for this. Of course, nobody had forced her until now. She came out of her own free will, because she had become dependent on Michel's attention and guidance. A naive sixteen-year-old girl couldn't possibly know how subtle and calculating the abusers from the network had set their psychological trap. But she did put up some resistance. Mich noticed that his grip on her weakened. Chrissie felt that the attention she got didn't fully compensate the pain she had to endure. She started to criticize him.

One evening, after Chrissie had left, Tony, Mich and I went to a Brussels restaurant. Mich looked grim, which wasn't a very good omen. He usually was rather exuberant and when he was serious and dejected, then he was certainly disappointed, or worse. It was the first time I got scared for Chrissie's safety. He started accusing me of being responsible for her behaviour. If I weren't able to make her behave "the proper way" i.e. make her submissive, he would be forced to take certain measures. Tony brought up the idea of an initiation, and that this might well be the necessary thing to do to Chrissie. Mich thought it over, playing with his fork and then nodded in consent. And I got the shivers.

Their rituals terrified me. And I knew that I would be involved because they agreed on it in my presence. I could strangle that girl. She brought a lot of misery onto me. I really missed my friend Clo, but refused to admit it to myself.

"Clo's alive!" shouted a little voice in my head, to soothe the pain that came up again. Don't think about her, dummy! You know you can't think about her. She's alive, that's enough! And the pain decreased a little.

I looked at Tony, he smiled back, absent-minded, and I felt a growing desire to look for comfort with him. Because lately a feeling started descending on me that I was in the middle of a large swamp filled with quicksand, and I got this feeling more and more often. The precariousness of my existence, and that of my child, drove me, and this may seem paradoxical, right into his arms. After all he decided on what would happen to me. He held the power, he could always decide on my fate, my suffering, and my life. He could decide, on the spur of the moment, whether my child would remain alive or not. Whether or not it would be taken away from me. The more power he had over my life, the more I became dependent on him. He meant more to me than anybody in the world. He was my God, and that's how I looked at him.

20. The initiation

Tony kicked me out of bed, it must have been two a.m. I used to be a very light sleeper because I was always afraid of danger, but this time I fell out of bed entirely disoriented.

“Get up, get dressed!” he said in a brutal way.

My heart pounded, I felt fear in my belly and in my head. He pushed me into his car and we drove off at high speed towards the highway. I was still buttoning my blouse, shaking, when we were driving away. We went to Brussels and he drove in one street, out another until we came into a nice residential area. He had been silent the whole time, and I really feared for my life. After Clo it was my turn, wasn't it?

He pushed me into a well-equipped garage, with white tiles, hooks and rings built into the wall. The place was heated with radiators, there were artificial lights illuminating it, but at different spots there were candles. There was a bunny in a cage. The sawdust in its cage smelled fresh, part of it had fallen out because the little animal started jumping around, startled by us coming in.

“On your knees, girl!” he ordered.

I kneeled and stretched my arms. I knew I would be tied up. He put a handcuff around my right wrist, pushed the other one through a ring in the wall and then handcuffed my left wrist. He caressed my head and pushed the remote control button of the electric gate. It opened making hardly any sound. He then switched off the light and disappeared outside. My long wait started. My position was an ordeal. Because the ring was rather high in the wall, my arms were fully stretched, and thus my knees had to carry my entire weight, since I couldn't lower my bottom. After a while I got cramps in my arms, shoulder blades and lower back, and I experienced a crushing pain in my kneecaps. After a few hours my body felt like a dead weight, while all my nerve-endings seemed to be on fire. But the scariest of all was that I couldn't breathe normally anymore. The muscles around my chest and back were squeezing me like a belt, which made it more and more difficult to breathe. It forced me to switch to breathing with my belly muscles to keep the pain bearable. I wasn't able to shout or yell anymore; neither did I want to because this would have required a lot of energy, which I desperately needed to fight the pain. And furthermore it would have made the abusers livid with rage and nobody would have come to my rescue anyway.

I tried to go into a sort of sleeping state, a kind of trance, which eased the pain somewhat. I switched off my mind, focused on an internal light spot and blocked every emotion. I could control the pain to a certain extent. By not being there anymore, disassociating my mind from my body, I didn't feel the pain, or I wasn't really aware of it. This capability, on top of the years long experience in raising my pain threshold, allowed me to hang in this precarious position for many hours without real damaging effects.

Time wasn't important anymore. Time was something that people from the normal world used. Down here, in my world, time was an abstract notion. I was rudely awakened out of my trance by the opening of the gate. My eyes blinked against the light that entered the room. It was day already. Joe, the baron, one of my cruellest abusers, entered and closed the gate behind him. He took the key of the handcuffs and opened them. I carefully moved my hands and let my arms slide down very slowly. My entire body started to scream. The pain that vibrated through my body like thousands of sharp needles turned

me into an aggressive animal. Joe smiled, visibly enjoying my face twisted by pain. He grabbed my arm. I moaned, while tears of despair rolled down my cheeks. He pulled me up. For a few moments everything and the entire world seemed to have been swept away. The only thing in existence was this lacerating agony of pain. Every muscle, every nerve, every bone was on fire, stinging, screaming. My legs were unable to support me and I fell down what again caused me a maddening pain.

I cried with a hoarse voice, I could hardly breathe and my cry got smothered in my throat. Joe watched unmoved. He enjoyed it! I felt a maddening rage pound in my brains. I hated him, I hated the pain he made me endure, but even more I hated the way I crawled towards him as a dog towards his master. I crawled against his leg and begged for mercy with a husky voice, in vain of course. He forced me to stand up, threatening to beat me if I didn't.

When I had finally succeeded in standing upright, I saw black spots in front of my eyes and I kept leaning against the wall, totally dizzy. He kicked my legs from under me. I wept and he enjoyed it again.

"Who am I?" he asked. I looked up and the superior look in his eyes struck me.

"My master," I whispered, and I bowed my head.

"Good girl! Alright, you may pee now."

He helped me stand up and supported me until I was capable to take a few shaky steps on my own again, towards the toilet. It was located in the hall adjacent to the garage close to the front door. It had warm pink tiles and golden faucets. I urinated, washed my hands, that were still stiff and unwilling and I sank to the ground against the bathtub. I knew very well that I couldn't stay too long at this safe spot. He would become impatient and then would certainly hurt me. But the desire to stay put, just waiting, was so great. Just sit, disappear... I needed my entire strength to get up and open the door. Joe took me into the garage again, put the handcuffs back on after I gave him a blowjob and disappeared. Again several hours passed. The cramps reappeared. I reverted to my half asleep, half awake status and accepted the pain. And finally, after what seemed an endless wait, a few abusers trickled in. Tony, Mich, Joe and three others, among them Annie. I recognized her even before I could see her, because I recognized the smell of her perfume drifting towards me. My stomach contracted by the mere thought of the pain that was imminent.

This time it was Tony who released me. He allowed me to recover slowly and it took me a few minutes to discover that I wasn't the only girl anymore. An eight-year-old girl, of a foreign type, a little boy who must have been ten or eleven and Chrissie. Mich had blindfolded her and made her sit down on a black leather bench, tied her wrists with leather straps to two rings left and right from her head. She wasn't really afraid because Mich had convinced her it was a game. He told her with a soothing voice that he would take care of her.

"Today you will make your entrance into my group. Today you will reach adulthood," he said solemnly. She smiled but it struck me how she nervously clenched her fists.

The initiation went according to a fixed scenario. It resembled a macabre satanic mass, a weird spectacle of men wearing capes and masks, the "Mistress" entirely dressed in leather including her mask, commanding the men to torture or abuse the children in certain ways. It was a show aimed at making us so terrified that we wouldn't talk about it. How in heaven's name could a little girl tell someone that she had been raped by the devil

or by Mickey Mouse? The adults knew that very well. They weren't Satanists or anything like that but they skilfully used the ritual to scare the children and make them keep their mouth shut because no one would believe them anyway. And of course they wanted to achieve total control over Chrissie. Slowly and meticulously they worked towards the climax. Two of the guests rolled "the altar", a table on wheels covered with black leather, towards the middle of the room and put the brakes on the wheels.

Tony led me to the table, on top of which I had to lie down, my legs spread apart, my arms stretched out above my head. Joe took the rabbit out of its cage, a sweet white little thing with red eyes; it kicked its rear legs in panic. The man who was holding the knife took it over from Joe, held it above me, right above my belly, and cut it open with one single slash.

The bunny's squeal went right to the bone. I closed my eyes and felt the warm blood dripping on my body. It nauseated me, and I only started breathing again when the squealing had stopped. The bunny was dead, finally. All was deadly quiet in the garage. The other kids stared at the dead animal above me. Their eyes filled with terror. The first sound I heard was the desperate sob of the little girl. The threat had become real to Chrissie. If she ever betrayed the group, her family would be in danger. She was ordered to drink from the chalice with the rabbit-blood, to fulfil her lifelong duty to protect the group.

From now on he was her master, Mich told her. He would protect her; she owed lifelong loyalty towards him and the group. Did she promise that? Chrissie nodded. Her power to resist was crushed. For the first time in her life she had witnessed how an animal was killed in a cruel way, and she could imagine clearly what could happen to her and her family.

Chrissie was allowed to go home now. Her initiation was over. The other children were raped and abused until the abusers were satisfied. During the abuse they showed child porn movies. With a dangerous grin on his face Joe chose a tape on which a very young girl, about two years old got raped and murdered. He forced me to watch while he used a vibrator on me. When I was finally brought outside it seemed as if the major part of myself, of my soul had been murdered.

Later, during the police investigation I would recognise this house in a street in Sint-Pieters-Woluwe a Brussels suburb. I would give a detailed description of the interior. It would have been so easy to order a house search and to verify my story. No house search would ever be ordered. Excuse me; there would be a search, at my house, to find out if I got all the details of my testimony from newspapers or magazines!

I don't understand how I managed to go on with life. How I still managed to put a smile on my face, to play my part in the sham called "my happy family". I was totally destroyed inside. More than ever I noticed that I lost track of time and reality. It appeared I had gone to school, had good reports, had even a few classmates who actually talked to me, but all this seemed not to be part of my life. It looked as if someone else took over for me, as soon as the door of my house closed behind me. It looked as if the abused Ginny was kept in storage until Tony stood at my bed again or at the school entrance. The abused Ginny hardly knew anything about the school- and family-life; the other Ginny seemed to be absent during the abuse and thus led a "normal" life. It had always been like this.

In Knokke, at my Grandma's, the adults had noticed that I talked to voices inside my head, that I often changed moods very quickly or even started talking with a strange voice or accent. I was only five or six but I understood this was a crazy thing to do and I wasn't allowed to do that. I learned how to hide my voices, my other "alters". After what happened to Clo, the voices grew stronger, as did the bizarre feeling that from time to time, I was guided by these inner voices (personalities?). After the initiation I didn't fight the voices any longer. It felt great to disappear into nothing and to become conscious again when Tony was present. The suffering seemed more bearable that way.

Tony was the only adult who understood something was "wrong" in my head. But instead of getting upset he started cultivating it. He gave me different names: Pittimouse, Girl, Whore, Bo. These names slowly started to belong to me. The weird thing was that when he used a specific name, the behaviour associated with this name immediately surfaced. Pittimouse became the name of the little girl he brought home after the abuse, a scared and skittish girl that he comforted by talking to her in a kind, fatherly way. Girl was the name of that part of me that belonged to him only e.g. when he abused me in my bed, early in the morning, and nobody around. Whore was the name for the part of me that worked for him. Bo was the young woman who took care of him when he was drunk and needed to be looked after.

"Just trust me," he said when I asked him curiously why he gave me so many names.

"Papa Tony knows you better than you know yourself!"

Nothing could be truer. I would find out later that Tony had taken child psychology classes at the Brussels University and that he knew about DIS before its existence became accepted by most psychiatrists.

21. Treason

Tony always had other girls. One of them was Marie, a girl from the Brussels area. Her mother was a prostitute. Marie was older than me, more experienced. She was the well-groomed type, with polished nails and fashion clothes, I was more a tomboy, and it took me some effort to fit in a classy environment. We never liked each other, but Chrissie became our common problem. Even after her initiation she couldn't adapt to the group. She tried, but it seemed to be more difficult than she expected. In my opinion she was simply too old to learn how to function properly in this kind of environment, she had joined the group too late. She loathed oral sex, which was a very popular thing in the group and she really couldn't cope with anal sex. But they gave her time to adapt. Mich knew very well that if he put too strong a pressure on her, Chrissie might start to send out distress signals to the outside world. This wasn't a problem with young children, because they were almost unable to produce a coherent story, but Chrissie was older and would certainly be able to do that. Mich was thus very careful not to traumatize her so deeply that it became visible to outsiders. But he was frustrated and made other girls pay the bill. I was the one responsible for her training, so I had to undergo the punishment. Tony and Mich took this very seriously. I was sent to all the SM parties and was regularly beaten in the middle of the group as an example for the other victims. Now that I almost perfectly

fit into their environment, they suddenly punished me for the failure of someone else. Chrissie was starting to make me sick. Marie experienced the same feelings. She too was treated brutally when something didn't work out with Chrissie. The hatred that Marie felt towards her grew bigger every day, an emotion I had severely underestimated.

At a party shortly afterwards things became too much again for Chrissie and she ran towards the bathroom. I came in immediately after her. She was sitting on the floor in front of the toilet, crying. I sat down on the rim of the bathtub, put my hand on her shoulder and let her calm down a little. I then took a glass, filled it with water and let her drink.

"I can't go on with this, Reggie. I really can't!" she started sobbing. I didn't answer but stared towards the floor.

"I'm so afraid of him!"

I nodded, knowing exactly what she meant. Michel's joviality was misleading. She started to understand very well now, how dangerous he really was.

"Would he hurt me if I hid from him? Would he do as he said and hurt my parents?"

I looked at her and nodded again.

"Mich is dangerous, Chrissie. He's a vampire. He will suck you empty until you're dead inside. But I don't think he'll do anything bad to your folks if you tell them!" She slowly nodded her head.

"I can't tell them what happens to me. Reggie, they would never forgive me," she started crying again, "And all of this is my fault. I did this to them!"

I put my hand on her shoulder again.

"Tel them Chrissie. Tell them. You don't have to tell them everything you know. Just tell them you're afraid of an older man!"

Boy, had I made a huge mistake! I knew it as soon as I pronounced the words, but I couldn't refrain from doing it. I couldn't let her go down and this made me commit a crucial error which would destroy her life and mine nearly too. I had betrayed the group. When Marie complained again to me about Chrissie, I told her annoyed that she didn't have to worry because Chrissie wouldn't bother us any longer. She would talk to her parents or her brother and the problem would be solved. Marie glared at me, furiously. How could I be so damn stupid, she hissed. Before we knew, the police would come, our pimps would be arrested and we would be pulled out of our family and locked up until we were twenty-one! She declared me totally insane and I got scared to death. Marie was right. What had I done? I guess Marie must have told Mich that same evening. And the ultimate nightmare was about to begin.

Tony told my mother. This time the punishment wouldn't be just a beating, a gang rape or a gynaecological treatment with razorblades. It would be a lot worse. They knew that Tiu was my weak spot, and that's what they went for first. My mother drove Tiu and me to Brussels where we met Tony at the highway parking in Groot-Bijgaarden. We then continued towards a riding-school in Meise that Mich knew very well. A few of my abusers were waiting there. I put up a desperate fight, I screamed, I begged for mercy but with a sadistic pleasure Michael the Brussels lawyer, mutilated the private parts of my little son with a knife and then killed him with a hammer. In the meantime they raped me. The mother of Anne, one of the girls of the group, took photographs. She and her

husband often attended sex parties with children. They threw Tiu's body on the ground and rubbed my face in his blood. I was then forced to pick up the body and throw it into a plastic garbage bag. Even today there are moments at which I suddenly hear the bump of his body falling into the bag. I'll never forget this sound. The last little piece of human awareness that was left in me died. I lost my voice. I couldn't cry anymore. My feelings were destroyed. I turned into a robot and lost track of time.

The shock following my baby's murder swept away the hours and maybe days that followed. I have some faint memories about having been brought to a sex party with Chrissie. But these memories could have been from a party before. It is a fact that we were brought together somewhere, undressed and that a bag was put over our head. I think it was the day of Tiu's murder but it is possible that it was one or two days later. They put us in different cars, naked. We drove for a short while until they stopped and made me get out. I could hear Chrissie a little further. I was barefoot and felt sharp edges, like little pebbles or something. I remember how the door opened when we arrived. They pushed me inside the house, it was empty, cold and it smelled mouldy. I heard Mich ask if everything was ready. I got really scared. Someone painted a symbol on our body. I still had the bag over my head and tripped over some sort of threshold or pipe in the hall. They took our bags off. Tony pushed a knife inside of me and asked if I loved him. Chrissie had totally lost control and screamed like hell. I remember the kitchen. How Chrissie was tied up on top of the table and repeatedly raped. There was no electricity and the candles they used threw spooky shadows on the walls with their old peeled off wallpaper. Chrissie kicked and floundered but eventually became submissive to avoid the pain. She begged for forgiveness. They tied her up like a rabbit with a rope around her legs, arms and neck, in a way that she would strangle herself if she resisted. They accused her of treason.

"What have you said, to whom did you talk, what have you written down?" they shouted at her, and they didn't take no for an answer. They knew Chrissie kept a diary and they wanted to find it. This diary would later be found by the police but would mysteriously disappear (see further) as a consequence of the cover up operation.

I tried to close myself off, now already, from what I saw was about to happen. I begged myself to stay strong, before I would die.

There are things that stay with you forever, other things your memory refuses to reproduce. I can't remember the clothes Chrissie wore, but I remember what the floor tiles looked like in the kitchen, the little patterns and the spots where the floor wasn't level anymore. I remember the ceiling, the walls, the chimney, and the glass wall in the hallway. I remember the cold stones on the terrace, the grass and the cold floor under my feet when we headed for the cellar. The concrete stairs, the low arched ceiling, the wood and the junk all over the place, the smell of the candles, the odour of their sweat. The fear.

I noticed Marc Dutroux was there too but he didn't really join in. I had met him several times before. He seemed to be the guy who had to do all the odd jobs.

And the cruelty went on. We both got raped with a metal stick that Annie had heated up in the flame of a candle. They burned us with cigarettes. But they really went after Chrissie. Chrissie struggled. My most sadistic offender, Michael the lawyer, then raised

an iron peg and took aim at her head. Her head started bleeding. He then grabbed her arms and raised his hand again. She screamed, a screaming that won't stop in my head. They tied her up with some sort of electric wire, her legs bent backwards, the wire around her hands and neck. He slammed pegs in her wrists. Annie sprinkled both of us with some liquid that smelled like fuel. She pretended she would put me on fire but Tony told her to stop pestering me. Then they burned Chrissie and Tony took me outside. My clothes were in his car and I put something on and we took off. When we arrived home in Ghent my mother threw a temper tantrum because I was still alive. This is the only time I ever heard her raise her voice against Tony.

I sank into a swamp, into quicksand. All those events are burned into my soul. They come alive again in my nightmares. The memories, these cursed memories that will haunt me for the rest of my life. I fight them, but the nightmares keep coming back, and every time it seems to last forever. It is a timeless thing. It never stops but always starts over again.

I don't know how long I lived on automatic pilot. How I finally climbed out of the hole again, to realize that my life continued, obviously without me being part of it. I still went to school each day, I still had sex with customers when Tony told me to. I laughed, I nodded, I sat, and I gave a paw on command. Was this life?

It was Tasja, my white mare, who healed my wounds. Through her warmth and the safe stable where I used to hide for hours on end, I slowly acquired some faint feelings again. I started sensing the hay tickling my nose, I could feel heat and cold again. I noticed I had lost weight, I only weighed forty-five kilos, and I had forgotten the most basic things like how to hold a fork, where the light-switch was in my room. I couldn't tie my shoelaces anymore, numbers seemed strange to me. One, two, three... it didn't really mean anything. I had the greatest difficulty following the math class. I never excelled at math but even the simplest sum now exceeded my comprehension. It might seem silly, but this made my life miserable. I had to make a real effort to drink from a cup with one hand. I couldn't possibly remember how to turn on the light of my bike. I had forgotten how to cry. Whatever happened to me, I couldn't cry anymore. The feeling just wasn't there. It was gone.

I taught myself how to hold a fork again but couldn't do better than a little kid, holding the handle in my fist. It took me weeks before I rediscovered where the light-switch was and how I could use it. I felt happy as a small child when I discovered it was exactly the same one as the ones downstairs in the living room. I hadn't even thought of this during the previous week. I never untied the laces of my sneakers; I slid my feet in and out so I didn't have to tie a bow. It would take more than a year for Erwin to teach me again how to tie a bow.

Little by little I tried to take control again over my mind. Some motor problems remained. Numbers kept giving me a headache. I suffered from hyperventilation, couldn't sleep any longer than one and a half hour a night. I didn't take care of myself anymore except when Tony dragged me into the bath. How I should wash, when, how often... all those things didn't seem to come back.

But the months went by and then came the summer of 1984. I was pregnant again and gave birth to my third son, all alone and in total secrecy. I didn't want the perverts do to me again what they liked to do so much to young girls giving birth. I called him Nanook, an Inuit name. But I was desperate. The sound of the bump when they let Tiu's dead body

fall into the garbage bag – I’ll never forget that horrible sound – haunted me again. I guess I must have had a panic attack when I heard Tony’s car arriving. I squeezed Nanook against my breast very hard. He stopped moving. When Tony came in he didn’t care about my bewildered face, he wasn’t mad at me, but he praised me, because I was entirely part of the gang now. It was as boy, again, and he didn’t consider it a big loss. I didn’t feel any emotion. Maybe I was glad I could prevent him from having to live. I didn’t care anymore. I didn’t want this anymore. I didn’t want to live anymore. Tony put me in the bath. Washed my back, my breasts, and my belly that felt empty and limp. I stared in front of me, silently, and the only thing I noticed was the flask of my mother’s sleeping pills. When Tony left, and I supposed he took the baby with him, I stretched my arm and reached for the flask. I took me a long time to get the lid off, but the reward was great. It was three quarters full. I took one pill, swallowed another, and another. I swallowed as many pills as I could. I couldn’t cry anymore but the feeling of relief at stepping out of this life was immense. But the childbirth, the warm water and the pills made me sick and before the tranquillisers could do their job I threw up.

22. My death sentence

Tony had given me a present, a golden heart. “Plus que hier, moins que demain” (more than yesterday, less than tomorrow) was engraved in it. I wore it around my neck. He was the only one who still mattered to me. My girlfriends, animals and other things I cared for were taken away from me again and again. My bunnies were killed. My dogs had disappeared when I came back home, I didn’t even get the chance to say goodbye. He burned my diary, because I wrote I wanted to be dead. My duck lay in the garden, lifeless. My children...

But he always came back. And I asked for nothing better than that he told me what to do, subdued me, and controlled me. I didn’t know what to do with my life anymore. That summer I planned several times to commit suicide, but my promise to Clo prevented me from carrying out this final act. I promised to live and to show the world that girls like her and me did indeed exist. I didn’t know how or when, but some time I would tell what happened. This idea kept me going. And even though I worshiped Tony, I was slowly losing faith in him. Every kiss he demanded from me, every sexual act he performed, strengthened my desire to flee.

Thanks to the personalities or alters or whatever in my soul, I had preserved deep inside of me, a little piece of the real Ginny. And that’s the Ginny who Erwin, my future husband, will soon notice in the stables, the Ginny who hoped for a better future. That Ginny had engineered an ingenious plan to survive. Because Tony, in all his stupidity, gave her the unmistakable sign that time to flee was running out.

“As soon as you’re sixteen you may come live with me!” he whispered in my ear, very sweetly. I didn’t want to let myself be paralysed by his false words. I knew he had signed my death sentence; I had only a few months left. Maybe I had lived in a haze the past months but all of a sudden I started thinking clearly again. I wasn’t afraid of death. I was afraid of the pain they could still inflict on me.

23. Erwin

Erwin was a sixteen-year-old boy from the riding school Ponderosa in Destelbergen near Ghent, where my horse had its stall. He was a quiet guy. In October 1984 I was ready to say farewell to life. Every new day seemed to crush me. The pain became more unbearable each night. In spite of the terrible things that had happened to me, I always had to be ready to satisfy these men who took me to places where I was abused, men against whom nobody protected me. And then, one day, I saw Erwin at the stable. He looked so young and clean. I suddenly got this strange feeling. I turned around abruptly because I didn't want anyone to see the tears in my eyes. I snivelled and ran off. This wasn't for me. I had to accept that I would never find a normal boy who would love and protect me. I was dirty, contaminated, affected. How would I dare to have these thoughts, these crazy fantasies? What boy would ever want me? But the image of the boy in the stable didn't leave my mind. Whenever I could go to the riding school, I hoped to meet him. This wasn't easy because he was often in the cafeteria and I was afraid to go in there. Tony was extremely jealous. If he knew that I wanted to socialize with the people from the riding school, he would give me a beating, or worse.

One day Erwin suddenly walked into the stable. My hopes surfaced again. I hadn't seen him for weeks and I reckoned that it was now or never. Funny, at night I was so experienced with adult men but how insecure and clumsy was I with this boy. I smiled at him and felt the tension crawl upwards from my stomach into my throat.

"Hi" I said.

My voice cracked. I hated my clumsy behaviour.

"Hello" he smiled back. "Are you gonna ride your donkey?"

"Donkey? Is it that what you call my horse?"

"Oh, I didn't mention the donkey on the horse yet" roared Erwin with laughter; in a way that was so free and natural that it hurt me. This craving for tenderness suddenly came up again. I looked at his face, defiant and curious.

"That's why I like you, like seeks like!"

I wanted to be funny, but one way or another I must have sounded very serious. He looked at me, surprised, flabbergasted. I saw in his eyes he understood that I meant what I said. My heart stood still. Then he turned around and walked out. The intense moment was gone. I ran towards my horse Tasja, who was quietly swinging her tail back and forth and snorted when I opened her stall door. I threw my arms around her warm neck as a greeting. I buried my face in her fur and breathed heavily. How I ever got the strength to say what I said seemed beyond my comprehension. That spontaneity that I had forgotten so long ago, made me feel alive for a short while. I stood there, my arms around my horse's neck and cherished this feeling that slowly ebbed away. It took me a long time to release Tasja and to go on with the life I dragged with me.

At the end of October I received an invitation for a horse-parade. I was surprised; I had never been invited before, at least not for such an innocent party.

“Is Erwin coming too?” I dared to ask the owner of the school. Such an effort to pronounce this little sentence!

“Yes”, she said and the same nervous excitement that I had felt before struck me again. I didn’t know how to handle these feelings. I felt insecure and scared but warm at the same time. That evening I rode my bike home, standing on the pedals, my hair blowing in the wind, the invitation in my hand. I wanted to shout it out, the excitement, the intense desire to be alive, a cry for freedom. It took me another week before I mustered up courage to ask Tony if I could go to the horse-parade. He didn’t answer immediately. The tension became unbearable. I asked my parents too of course, but that was unimportant. Tony took the decisions. Days went by. He came and went. I did what I was told to do. I waited.

The day came closer: 10 November 1984. On 8 November I started losing hope to be able to go the parade. Tony still hadn’t replied, and I prepared myself for the disappointment. The phone rang. I ran. Tony didn’t like me to keep him waiting.

“Hi pittimouse. How are you doing?”

“Fine Tony, thanks. Do you want me to do something for you?”

He sighed on the other end. I waited.

“You know what? I don’t feel too well these days. I think I’ll take a couple of days off. You’ll be fine won’t you?”

“Do you want me to do something, Tony?” I asked almost friendly. I expected him to give me a few assignments, but he didn’t. The last couple of months I had been so docile and submissive that I started to reap the benefits. He started to trust me.

“Tony...” I hesitated but forced myself to pronounce this sentence word for word, “May I go the horse-parade I told you about? Those people have invited me and...”

“All right, if you take your parents,” he sounded, tired, at the other end. I squeezed the horn with both my hands. I was afraid to ask anything more. Did I hear all right? Was I allowed to go without him? I didn’t obey my parents. Without Tony’s guidance they feared outsiders. I would have some limited freedom because my father and mother wouldn’t have the guts to intervene if I would socialize with kids of my own age.

“Tony” I whispered.

“Yes?”

“I love you.” I could feel his smile. But that’s the way it was, I was convinced I loved him in spite of the pain that he inflicted on me. I missed him when he wasn’t around, however, the last couple of months a weight seemed to be lifted from my shoulders when he left me alone for a short while. These mixed feelings made me confused and sad. It looked as if I didn’t want to let him go but had no other choice. For the first time I would go to a party I had chosen myself. I was excited, curious and scared at the same time. It had been such a long time since I felt so young. When I came in I didn’t really know how to behave. But the atmosphere was so relaxed that I quickly felt at home between all those youngsters. There were lots of laughs and someone even threw whip cream... I had a great time. I didn’t miss Tony at all. And then came the dancing contest. The newcomers who were initiated had to pair up and dance. When the music stopped, the couples had to unfold a newspaper and go stand on it as quickly as possible. The last ones would fall out until finally one couple remained.

Erwin was also among the ones that were initiated. He didn't stand far from me. Everyone was looking for a partner and I moved as close as possible to him, in such a way it was impossible for him to ignore me. I sent him an inviting smile and since he was a very polite young guy, his only way out was to ask me to dance. The contest went great for us. One by one the couples fell out until finally, Erwin and I won the game. We couldn't believe it. We cheered out of a pure excitement that was totally new to me. The music invited us to go on dancing. We carefully kept our distance. I felt light, happy, young. This was the first time I held a boy of my own age. It felt strange. Under my jeans and my sweater I was wearing sexy underwear, like a whore, but nevertheless I felt insecure and excited, like a young girl on her first date. Erwin's face came closer. I closed my eyes. His lips touched mine. He wasn't pushy, he just gave me a sweet, divine, loving kiss, timid, soft, tender. I surrendered to his lips and opened my mouth a little. It was the first time in many years that I didn't feel disgusted being kissed and I responded. I cuddled up in his arms and slowly felt my body warm up. A tingling crawled up my legs into my belly and upward to my neck and cheeks. I blushed from excitement and happiness. I kissed him again and again. The noise around us and even the music seemed to fade away.

I was in love.

That night, on the tenth of November, I went to bed with my heart pounding. There I was, staring at the ceiling, with my hands on my neck. My mind was restless. I felt insecure, but also full of hope and expectations. For the first time in so many years I had something to look forward to. Would he still remember me tomorrow? Would he meet me again tomorrow? Was I just a flirt, or more than that? My head was full of questions. In just a few hours I had madly fallen in love with that sweet Erwin. I was afraid to lose him, but it was more than just love. I had placed all my hopes of escape from Tony on him. Exhausted I shook my head. Escape? Why even think about it? Tony would never let me go. And on top of that I would have to tell Erwin everything. What could I tell him? "I'm afraid of Tony, you have to protect me..."

Fear crept into my heart, curling up like a fox in his hole. The next day, around eleven I went to the car park of the riding school. I looked out across the street hoping to see Erwin. I waited again, while time went by slowly as if I was being tested. The fear of being disappointed again almost paralysed me.

The sun stood rather low on the horizon and stung my eyes. All of a sudden there he was, a tall young guy with tangled hair, a small moustache and black riding pants. He quietly parked his motorbike and came towards me. I looked at him; my throat was dry with fear. I was convinced that he would simply pass me by, not remembering what happened the evening before. But he came right towards me, smiled and kissed me on the mouth. His lips felt fresh, clean, and innocent. I put my arms around his neck and gave him a big hug, hiding my face in his sweater and sniffed his smell, which had already become familiar to me. I didn't want to let him go, ever again. I looked at every little detail of his face. Every minute of that day, every second was imprinted in my memory. I wanted to remember every little detail. The warmth I felt every time he looked at me, the soft touch of his hand, the scent of his sweater... I cherished every second, wanted to make it last as long as possible, enjoy and be happy, because tomorrow it could be finished. I knew this couldn't last. Tomorrow or the day after, Tony would be back, ending the fairy tale.

My father picked me up. I looked at Erwin, sad. I put my arms around him one more time giving him a big hug. And again there was that cry of despair in my head: "Help me, don't leave me", but back came the loneliness. I said goodbye to my prince charming, convinced that this would be our last day together. Tomorrow Tony would be back.

While my father drove off I looked back at the boy who gave me hope. I kept looking until he disappeared behind a bend. Did I miss his affection! I became silent and withdrawn. When we arrived at home I closed the front door behind me, disheartened. My father pushed open the living-room door and there he was... relaxed, his left foot on his right knee, joking with my mother who giggled like a teenager in love. Her glass of wine was shaking in her hand. I looked at him, he looked at me, laughing, and I felt my heart sinking. This weight that is very difficult to describe, came down on my shoulders again, a deep sadness that made me so tired. I bowed my head. I was afraid to look him in the eyes while I went through the hall into the living room. My father lighted a cigarette, pulled up his pants, made that snivelling sound with his nose. He's the only one who can do that. I looked at him with fear.

"Please don't tell him," I prayed in silence, "Don't talk about Erwin." My father shook Tony's hand.

"Sorry it took so long, but my daughter needed some time to say goodbye," he chuckled. Tony threw his face at me. His eyes spit fire. Fear invaded me, my stomach turned upside down.

"Goodbye?"

"Yes, and you had a real good time, didn't you, Regine?" he sneered.

I nervously looked at Tony and hunched up my shoulders. Tony's smile had vanished. He didn't pay attention to my father anymore, or to my mother who had stopped giggling and angrily looked at my father. He diverted Tony's attention from her and she hated him for it.

"Go upstairs!" This rude tone of his voice scared me so much that I almost peed in my pants. I looked at my father. "Dad..." *Help me Daddy, tell him to go away.*

"Upstairs Ginny!"

I looked at my mother, hesitating, but she had put her hand on Tony's leg again. I quietly closed the door behind me and sneaked up the stairs. I waited, undecided. I went to the bathroom, and washed my hands slowly. I had trouble breathing. My heart started pounding. I pushed myself against the bedroom wall. I heard the living-room door open and close again. Then the typical sound of his feet on the stairs. For a moment he looked me in the face. I bowed my head, guilty.

"What did you do, Gina?"

I couldn't answer. My throat was paralysed. I had the feeling I lost my voice forever. He grabbed my chin with his fingers and forced me to look into his cold eyes. A lonely tear rolled off my cheek. *Oh Tony, forgive me, hold me, comfort me.*

"I'm sorry," I whispered, and a second tear appeared. *I miss you Tony, I miss you so. I can't let you go, please help me...*

He looked at me almost with compassion, shook his head. "You deserve to be punished".

"Tony, I love you, don't you know?"

I nodded. I knew what would come. He slowly took his belt off his pants, a move so familiar, so smooth, as if he had often practiced it. He turned me around, pushed my face

against the wall and lashed out at me, slowly, again and again. I braced myself and kept silent, my heart broke. It wouldn't matter anymore. Every lash pushed me further away from him. He punished me, I said goodbye. I didn't cry from pain, I cried because it was over. He knew it didn't have any effect anymore. Normally I would have turned around, had gotten down on my knees and opened his zipper. I knew that if I satisfied him, I had a good chance to be forgiven, but not this time. He was surprised. He stopped hitting me, turned me around and slapped me in the face. My cheek exploded but I stood firm, leaning against the wall with my head bowed as a sign of submission. But at the same time, my determination grew. Something inside of me started to live.

"You let him go, Gina, you dump him."

I slowly lifted my face. I burst into tears.

"No"

"What are you saying?"

"No" I whispered.

He hit me again. I almost lost my balance.

"You dump him or I'll get him!"

I looked at him in despair.

"You can't do that, Tony"

"You bet I can!" He straightened himself, showing his strength and resolve. I looked at him, for any sign of weakness.

"I'll kill him Gina, you know I will."

"..."

"So?"

"I'll dump him, Tony"

"Good girl"

He caressed my head, as if I were a dog. A chill came into my heart.

"When will you see him again?"

I didn't want to answer, but I couldn't stop the words coming out of my mouth.

"Saturday."

"All right, we'll do this. I'll come with you and you tell him it's over. If you don't, I'll kill him right on the spot, OK?"

I nodded. I felt blood drip from my lip. My nose bled from the slap. He took a hanky out of his pocket, wiped off the blood and kissed my burning cheek.

"Go to bed, now."

I watched him going down the stairs. A little later I heard my mother laughing in a subdued voice. I stared at the ceiling. The yellow streetlight projected strange patterns.

24. Dumping Tony

I prepared myself the entire week to say goodbye. I tried hundreds of lines in order to hurt Erwin as little as possible. I couldn't find a single good one. It wasn't a simple goodbye. It felt like my funeral speech. I finally made up my mind. I didn't give a damn anymore about the possibility I would get killed. I didn't want to go on living like this. I didn't

want to be rented out, borrowed, raped anymore. The mere thought of sex, pain and men made me puke. Every time I had to produce that defiant smile, while unbuttoning my blouse, cost me an enormous amount of energy. Even if he didn't kill me, I desired to be dead. I could get heroine quite easily. An overdose.

Only the illusion of a better life, the feeling of hope that invaded me the first time Erwin gave me a big warm hug, prevented me from committing suicide that week. I kept clinging to that faint hope to break free. Tony was in a really lousy mood. He hit me whenever he could, but something had changed. He seemed to become more cautious. Was he afraid of visible injury? Did he fear me filing a complaint? I didn't know, but he had become visibly insecure. And that's why that Saturday, although being scared to death, I felt a strength that grew greater with the hour. I got up, got dressed, riding-pants, black T-shirt, Bordeaux sweater three sizes too big. I wanted to be the way I imagined myself: half boy, half girl, everything but a whore.

I stared at myself in the mirror for a long time. I had forgotten how I looked. I saw a strange girl with curly auburn hair falling to her shoulders, and green eyes that seemed so cold. Who was that girl that evaluated me like an adult? Who was I?

I heard Tony's car come to a stop. That typical diesel sound that had once been pleasant when I was still full of hope that he would help me and love me. That same sound now stirred up feelings of disgust, of pain, sex and being abused. That sound announced my separation from the only boy, the only human being, who had ever been nice to me.

Tony had just poured himself a cup of coffee when I walked into my mother's workshop. He scared me when he looked at me. He was so self-confident, convinced of his power. In his eyes I could see that he still considered me his property. He grabbed me, put his hand under my shirt and started fondling my breasts while he was talking to my mother. I stood with my back against him, looking down at the floor, overwhelmed by shame. Even after all these years... I hadn't learned how to control shame. It felt so dirty. I clenched my fists and suppressed the desire to run away, it didn't matter whereto, just away, gone. Every touch made me feel more disgusted, nevertheless I put on a natural smile. That's what I had been taught. I forced myself to relax, slightly leaning against him to please him with my obedience. I got into the car, sitting beside him. "Hello" from Neil Diamond played on the radio.

"In fact I don't mind if you flirt with boys. You can have "toys" if you want, but you have to obey me. I'll give you a boy." What the hell did he want? To please me? I would probably get a boy from the network and what we did together would be recorded on video. That would be his typical solution. I nodded in an obedient way. Then we entered the cafeteria of the riding-school and sat down at a table, my parents and me, and Tony who sat down at my left.

Erwin was sitting at the counter looking at me surprised. Was I that girl who was so in love? Tony observed me with his complacent smile, but I wasn't afraid anymore. He nudged me, raised his eyebrows and turned his head slightly. I looked straight into his eyes, begging: Tony, please don't, I can't do this. But his eyes went ice-cold. "The clock is ticking, Gina" and the pain increased, it invaded my heart, my throat, my belly. The pain, the solitude, the fear... a cocktail of emotions that paralysed me. Erwin still sat on his stool, looking at me disappointed and sad. I knew I would lose him if I stayed with Tony but I couldn't get up.

Something inside me wanted to walk up to him and break it off without prolonging his suffering. I noticed Tony was observing me arrogantly with a big ugly smile. Erwin was badly hurt. He couldn't understand and looked away from me wiping off his tears with his sleeve. That nice girl that couldn't get enough of him the week before was now sitting beside an older man as... yes, as what?

Tony's smile got even bigger when he saw how hurt Erwin was. I saw how much he enjoyed it and then, all of a sudden, something exploded inside of me. I became filled with anger. I got up to defend Erwin like a she-wolf protecting her cubs. I turned around and my eyes pierced Tony, the adrenaline flowed through my veins. His eyes spat fire, his smile turned into an angry grin. In a split second we silently exchanged volumes. We were two fighting-cocks ready to attack. At that very moment it became suddenly clear to me that, with all these people around us, he couldn't do a damn thing. He couldn't lift a finger against Erwin, at least not now. So I turned around, walked up to Erwin, hugged him, and wrote my telephone number on a beer-mat.

"I can't explain everything to you right now, but I have a lot to tell you. Call me; day or night, I don't care when. Please do call me, I love you Erwin. I love you very much, do you believe me?"

Erwin nodded. He took the beer-mat from me.

Tony had jumped up from his chair. My parents almost tripped in their hurry to follow him. He dragged me outside, pushed me into his car violently, slammed the door shut and raced home. He parked the car abruptly and hardly took the time to turn off the engine before he started hitting me. I ducked to protect myself but I didn't make a sound. I had taken an important step. I had said goodbye, not to Erwin as Tony had planned, but to his ownership, and I wouldn't go back. Never. I didn't feel his blows. I was still hunched up but didn't feel any pain. My mother who was wringing her hands, frightened – the neighbours might see this – tried to make him stop, "Come Tony, wait until we're inside..." while my father hurried to unlock the door. Tony dragged me up the stairs and smashed me against my bedroom wall. He kept hitting me using his hands, his fists, finally his belt. He was outraged. I stood there with my head and back bent, but I didn't react at all. Inside of me an exultant voice shouted, "Free, free, free!!!"

Finally he stopped hitting. He stood there, gasping for breath, defeated. I raised my head. I noticed the stricken look in his eyes, those dark green eyes that resembled mine so much that, by the colour of his eyes, he could have been my father. For a moment I wanted to hug him. I had almost extended my arm, inviting, consoling.

"Why?" he asked.

My throat contracted. I swallowed painfully while tears of sorrow and sadness started flowing.

"I love you Tony," I whispered. He shook his head.

"So why do you court a young puppy?"

I looked at him, tears rolled down my cheeks. Oh stupid Tony, why don't you understand that all you have to do is hold me tight and tell me that you'll always protect me?

"You have made your choice, haven't you?" I shook my head violently.

"No Tony!" I want you, as a father, as a friend, as my eternal love...but please stop hurting me! He looked at me with deep sadness.

“One day he’ll know he fell in love with a whore. You’ll soon lose him Gina, remember these words!” He looked old and tired. I wept, said no, wanted to stop him.

“I love you Tony, I love you!”

“I don’t want a whore who fucks every snotnose she can get!” My heart broke. I wanted to shout that I never wanted to be a whore. I wanted him to know that he had gotten me that far. I wished I wouldn’t have to give up on him to have a life. I wouldn’t have minded to be his own whore, if he wouldn’t have hurt me so much.

Suddenly escaping my world seemed threatening. The outside world seemed so big, so dangerous, so frightening. At this very moment at which I had opened the door to a better future, I wanted to go back to my familiar environment. But Tony turned his back on me. I saw him go downstairs. I wanted to go after him, ask forgiveness. But I stayed put. I heard him slam the door closed, start his car. It took forever before I had gained enough strength to go to the bathroom and prepare a hot bath. My back was badly hurt and I started to feel the pain now, but the hot water helped ease it. Slowly I realised the importance of the step I had taken. I had had the guts to persevere. Never again would I be Tony’s property.

25. Two worlds

My mother hated Erwin. He was a hindrance because I wasn’t available without restriction anymore. He had turned her life with Tony upside down and she feared he would dump her. Of course she didn’t show it openly. Everything got settled in a subtle manner in my family. She was nice towards Erwin, but as soon as he had turned his back she started blackmailing me. She threatened to commit suicide, pretended she would put me in a children’s institution. But I didn’t give in. She was my mother but I didn’t feel any respect for her. How could I? She had driven me to Tony’s places, knowing that men would throw me on top of a table, tear off my clothes, and rape me. And sometimes it was much worse. She had never given me any support; she had never opposed Tony when he wanted me to join their games. She only “spoiled” me when she wanted to buy my silence. I ached for love and tenderness. I wanted her to protect me but I was not able to say the words. I didn’t want to be humiliated asking her for love. So we never talked.

Erwin kissed me goodbye and went home. The moment he left I felt a heavy silence come down on me, as if a storm was approaching. I went to bed but it took me several hours to fall asleep. I woke up, startled, by an internal alarm. Stiff with fear I lay in my bed, my knees pulled up high, my fingers intertwined. I heard someone open the door and I knew immediately what was going to happen. Tony was back. He sat down on my bed. His hands removed the blankets, reaching straight for my breasts, as if I were his doll. My mind floated away, away from my body, out of the bedroom, away from my Mom who was giggling downstairs. Why? Why did she let him in? When it was over I always fled into the bathroom, humiliated. I washed and tried to hide desperately what had happened during the night. And this started to happen more and more often. I got confused, lost track of time and hardly remembered what happened at school. I forgot what I had told

Erwin and couldn't recall what I did an hour ago. I was often startled when he spoke to me, and then I reacted aggressively not letting him touch me. But Erwin was strong. He didn't have the slightest problem making contact with youngsters of our age. This had a positive influence on me. I learned how to listen, to laugh, and to play as a real adolescent. I wasn't an outsider any longer. When Erwin was with me I thrived. He was my guide and I couldn't have handled it without him. I was so insecure and vulnerable. He had to spend an awful amount of energy taking care of me. In the morning he came to my house, helped me out of bed, helped me wash and get dressed. He then accompanied me to school. In the afternoon he picked me up at school and stayed with me until he tucked me in. I was so tired, as if I had to catch up on years of sleep. When we came home in the afternoon, I often didn't have any energy left to talk to him. He watched me lying on the bed, caressed my hair and asked me what was wrong. I didn't know.

After that 10th of November I should have been happy, and although I often felt that way indeed, deep inside of me there was still an immense sadness. Why was I so sad, as if I had already lived a very long life? I didn't know.

"What have they done to you, Ginny?" he asked. My throat went dry again. I looked away. Unspeakable words welled up.

"There are things you better not talk about, Erwin," I whispered.

"No Ginny, you have to tell me, please let me help you."

"..."

"Is it that man, Ginny?"

"Who?"

"Tony."

My entire body started shaking. I wasn't cold but when I heard his name my entire body reacted.

"You don't understand what you're talking about...he did things..." I wanted to cry, if I would have been able to, but somehow the tears got stuck. I became bitter and hard.

"You don't have any idea what men can do to little girls."

Erwin took my hand.

"It is true, I don't know what they do, so tell me!"

Slowly, hesitant I told him that Tony did things with me, things I didn't want, sexual things and other.

"And what?" asked Erwin.

"Lend me out," I answered, "He lent me out to other men."

Erwin, was silent. He couldn't find anything to say but pulled me close to him and stayed until I was asleep.

But Tony, my tormenter, showed up as soon as Erwin was out of sight. It was a continual cat and mouse game. I couldn't refuse because he scared me too much. Deep inside of me I heard Clo's voice.

"Obey Reggie, or you will die!"

And my mother kept putting me under pressure to let Tony have his way. She didn't want to lose him and was determined to break up my relationship with Erwin. So she told me she would sell my horse. After Clo's death Tasja had become my little sister. I rode her daily and talked to her as if she were human. I told her all my problems and this gave me

a huge relief. Now my mother would sell her. I strongly protested and could delay her decision for a while. In the meantime I looked around myself and found a man who was willing to buy her for fifty thousand franks. He would put her in a pasture where I could still visit her and ride her from time to time. But my mother found out. The day before the man would come to pick her up I went to Tasja's stall in the riding school and saw it was empty. The same feelings that I had when I saw Cheyenne's empty little bed invaded me. Nervously I asked the people from the school what happened to my horse.

"Don't you know?" they asked me.

And then they explained that Tasja had been brought to the slaughterhouse shortly before. My mother had been quicker than me!

My head went dizzy and my stomach contracted. I was going to throw up. My mother had sold her for fifteen thousand franks to have her killed, she hadn't even allowed me to say farewell! It was March 1985.

I went into a severe depression and if I hadn't had Erwin I would have killed myself. As my mother had hoped my resistance decreased and I let Tony have his way. He now brought other men along. I silently swallowed the shame and the humiliation, but poor Erwin started having a rough time with me. What I had to endure at night, I took out on him. A year after Erwin and I met, this double life had really worn me down. I couldn't stand Erwin any longer, his touch, his attention. I didn't want it any longer. I felt contaminated. The contrast was too heavy and it was destroying me. One night, after Tony finally left, I put a record on the record player. I was trembling and had to try three times before I managed to put the needle on the record. John Denver's warm voice broke through the heavy silence. I leaned backward against the wall behind my bed, and blindly grabbed a razorblade that was lying on the bookshelf to my left.

"I'm sorry..." sang Denver, and his voice gave me comfort. But I hated my dead body. I hated the night, the solitude, and the helplessness. I loathed myself. I looked at the gleaming razor blade. Quietly I started cutting my arm, line after line. I couldn't utter a sound. I didn't feel anything. I just saw the blood – the punishment. I deserved to be punished, because I had been born, because I existed. I punished myself because I managed to stay alive while others...

Then I got angry and threw the razor blade away. I wrapped my arms around my head and started rocking back and forth. I couldn't stop repeating this single word: "Why?"

But then came dawn, colouring the ceiling blue, pink and then white. The rays of the morning sun made life bearable again.

Erwin entered my room, I smiled, confused, and threw my arms around his neck, chasing my nightmares away. He hugged me, surprised because I let him. Then he suddenly froze, looked at my arms and rolled up my sleeves. Horrified he noticed the many cuts. My arms looked terrible, with coagulated blood and cuts that started bleeding again. I was so ashamed that I didn't have the guts to tell him what I did. For the first time he was angry with me. He took me to the bathroom, washed my arms, and dried them carefully. I let him, although I had to suppress the desire not to start cutting again. I wanted to feel the pain; it *had* to hurt so at least I felt something.

"Why the hell did you do that?" he asked in a rather unfriendly way. I shrugged my shoulders.

"Ginny, goddammit, tell me! How can you do such a thing?" I looked beside him.

“This time you are going to tell me, it doesn’t matter if we sit right on this spot for the next three days!” he screamed with impatience.

“He was here again.”

“Who?”

I shut up, terrified to say another word. Maybe I already said too much. He would be back shortly and hurt me again. I couldn’t speak.

“Who was here again, Ginny?”

“Tony.”

Erwin took me in his arms. His voice trembled when he promised me not to leave me alone ever again.

“From now on we will sleep together, live together. I will never leave you alone anymore Ginny, that scumbag won’t come near you again, I swear!”

I clung to him, this young lad was more of a man than my own father had ever been.

Erwin was my rock, always present, putting me back together when I fell to pieces. In 1986 we registered at our new school. I chose the special youth programme and he decided to stay with me to protect me. We ended up in a class of sixteen students, all of them problem kids, who had chosen this programme for personal reasons. We were all trying to find our true selves and therefore we formed a very special, unique group. In spite of my enormous difficulties I felt a sense of belonging there. For the first time in my life I felt accepted. This yielded results soon. Because I was given enough space to discover my true self, more and more images from the past resurfaced. I often thought I was going crazy. Why did I feel so different? Why did I seem to have had experiences unknown to the others? Bart, a classmate and a close friend of mine, sat beside me in the class, next to the radiator. We talked about relationships, friendships and sex. He told me he had had a very fulfilling relationship with an adult woman. I couldn’t understand. For sure I didn’t have nice memories about older men. I asked him when he had done it for the first time.

“Thirteen” he said, adding that he thought it was too early. Too early? I was...well, very young.

“How old were you?” he asked.

“I wasn’t even eight years old,” I replied spontaneously, and in a flash I saw how four men held me down... Immediately I shut the door to my memories, frightened.

“God Regina, that’s really very young. That’s not normal!”

I broke off the conversation. His reaction shocked me. Not normal, why not? This incident kept haunting me. One way or another, this conversation again and again disturbed the artificial tranquillity that I had created by suppressing my memories. What the hell was wrong with me? I went to bed with guys, so what? Was this so abnormal?

Halfway through the last school year, in 1988, the pedagogics teacher, together with the psychology teacher held a comprehensive lecture on child abuse. In a scientific manner, they summed up all the symptoms that abused children showed i.e. self-mutilation, extreme mood changes, depressions, contact problems, negation, feelings of shame and guilt, the lack of ability to express one’s feelings...

I was dazzled. Every symptom they had mentioned was applicable to me! How was this possible? I wasn’t battered or abused! On the contrary, my parents told me that I was spoiled rotten. My father asked me to do him a little favour and then I got a present,

whatever I wanted. In fact I didn't enjoy his presents. Presents are supposed to be given; I had to work for them. I used to collect little statues of horses and they all stood on the mantel of the chimney in my room. But for every statue he gave me I had to "pay" him. I started to dislike the statues and broke them. I felt ashamed, but after the bell rang I stayed behind in class. I asked my teacher for explanations.

"Miss, if you have the feeling that your parents don't care about you, is this neglect?"

She sat down again and listened to my story. How I moved back to Ghent in the summer of '79 and how I only dared to say I was hungry after three days. My parents had simply forgotten to feed me. How they didn't wash my dirty clothes and threw them back in the wardrobe dirty, mouldy. That they often didn't even know if I was home or not. That they didn't know which school I went to and what I studied. How my mother was often drunk when she groomed dogs and how I then had to take over and bring her to bed. How my father kept calling me trash. The teacher didn't get up from her chair but said:

"Ginny, if that is true, you have been severely neglected. I can't say anything else."

"Is this abuse, Miss?"

"Yes Ginny, that's abuse. It doesn't matter how you look at it, that's definitely abuse."

"But they gave me lots of things?" *and they just as easily took them away again!* A little voice inside of me shouted. I slinked off. Erwin was waiting for me outside.

"Where were you?" he asked. I didn't answer. The little gears in my head were spinning at high speed.

I suddenly remembered that in 1982, I had a Dutch language teacher whom I really admired. He told us captivating stories and had an excellent rapport with his students. I completely trusted him. One day at lunchtime I was alone with him in his class, helping to clean up. After a long hesitation I mustered up the courage to speak to him.

"Sir, I have something to tell you."

"Yes, what is it?"

"It's my parents, Sir..."

"Oh?"

"Something is wrong at home. My mother...she doesn't like me, I think. She doesn't want to have me."

"How do you know?"

"She gives me away..."

"What are you saying there?"

The bell rang and I got startled and closed my mouth. A week later he visited my parents and the next day he called me. He started yelling at me and called me names.

"You should thank God on your bare knees for having such wonderful parents!" he raved. I was a bad kid, a liar. I totally lost his favour. This was my second failed attempt to talk to adults about my abuse. Although I didn't get punished so severely anymore as happened to me when I talked to the head nun in Knokke, it convinced me that there was no way out for me.

But now my pedagogics teacher made me realize that I had been cheated. My parents had made me believe that I had had a happy childhood, a fake world they were so proud of. That day I felt that the truth was very more complex.

26. Married, all hell breaks loose

On 29 June 1988, the day before our graduation, Erwin and I got married. We were both nineteen. I beamed all day. Surprised, I looked at that ring around my finger. It was a symbol of freedom to me. It was my mother who, a few weeks before, had decided that we should get married. She had asked us what we were planning to do after our graduation. We had shrugged our shoulders. Erwin and I had considered going to Africa but we hadn't made concrete plans yet. All of a sudden my mother pulled out her notebook and turned over the pages until she came to 29 June. That's the only day I have free, she said. Erwin and I looked at each other with raised eyebrows.

"What for, Mom?"

"To get married of course!" she said.

Everything was organised in no time. We got married on a Wednesday afternoon. Erwin wore a suit. I got a second-hand dress but what the heck! I felt rich like a queen. That ring meant my freedom; at least that's what I thought then. Our classmates toasted to our happiness. It was an unforgettable day in all its simplicity. The next Saturday my mother had organised a party. The entire family was invited, with my grandmother as the matron. My mother had personally invited Tony. This made me so angry. He looked at me for a long time but I turned my head away. I was determined not to let him ruin my day. Why in the world did he have to be there, on my wedding day? But dutifully I kissed him on the cheek. "You look great, pussy cat," he whispered in my ear. I pretended I didn't hear him.

I was so excited when I opened the front door of our first little house. I looked at Erwin behind me and he encouraged me with a smile. I walked inside barefoot and felt the cool floor. The stairs made a funny cracking sound. The small living room was light and sunny and I smelled the freshly waxed floor. This was great! The only piece of furniture was an empty cupboard that Erwin had managed to get somewhere. I lay down on the floor, flat on my back, my arms and legs spread wide open. This little house at the Voorhoutkaai, a riverside quay in the centre of Ghent, was my first safe haven. It didn't matter that it was rather primitive and had a leaking roof.

"Free!!!" I yelled as loud as I could.

Erwin got a job and went out working during the day and I stayed at home. I sat on the windowsill for hours listening to John Denver or The Wall from Pink Floyd, and I observed the people from my safe spot. We had bought a whole set of second-hand furniture, a rotan chair, a television set and other things that came in handy. My cat and my parrot made it cosy. I deliberately locked myself up between these four walls.

The first month I spent most of the time, sitting in a corner of the living room, paralysed by fear because very slowly the horrible memories of the past started to come back. The safety of my own place and the fact I didn't have a job gave me the opportunity to think. I didn't really look for it; the memories just fell upon me. At night I woke up suddenly, after only two or three hours of sleep, feeling endangered and threatened. I had the impression that someone had dragged me out of my bed, slapped me in the face and kicked me in the stomach. I instinctively doubled up with pain. I desperately fought for

several seconds to be able to breathe again. He dragged me down the stairs, threw me on the icy cold street, chafing my knee. The BMW had its engine running. I noticed the monotonous drone under the hood. He threw me in the trunk, closed the cover and left me in this choking space, pitch-dark, curled up like a scared little hedgehog. I'm going to die, flashed through my mind. I jumped out of bed, went to the living room and turned on the music very softly to chase the ghosts away. I sat down on the bench, squeezed my arms very hard, until the fear ebbed away. The next day I desperately resumed my role. The role of my life: smile and go on!

Every day became harder. Erwin came home to a place that looked more chaotic each day. I didn't clean, the dirty laundry was piling up, and the dirty dishes were all over the place. And his wife was sitting on the ground between all the trash, yelling and screaming if he dared to come close. Quite often it took him several hours to put the household back together. Sometimes I was cheerful, full of energy and life, cleaning up everything in less than half a day. He then hoped that the hard times were behind us. But the cheerfulness ebbed away after a few hours and turned into periods during which I was only able to sit in a corner apathetically, became aggressive or just ran off. I roamed the streets for hours, not knowing where to go, until I was exhausted and totally confused, sitting on the doorstep waiting for Erwin to come home. It got worse every day. I wanted to run, run and keep running. I wanted to leave everything. I was afraid of myself. What was I guilty of? Erwin had tried everything: being sweet, paying attention, not talking back, getting angry, nothing changed my behaviour.

Occasionally we talked about Tony and what he had done. But I was very protective of him. Was it the so-called "Stockholm Syndrome"? Erwin couldn't say an ugly word about him or I lost my temper. Tony had been like a father to me, I couldn't admit he had ever hurt me. We often got into a big fight over this. Erwin couldn't understand my reaction and we slowly drifted apart. We were totally helpless against coping with the pain from my past. Neither of us could imagine how deep the wounds really were. Without help we wouldn't get out of this. After another fight in a long series, I gazed through the window and caught myself wanting to jump. The peace that death would bring had an almost magical attraction to me.

"Winny, I'm getting insane. Something is very wrong with me," I said quietly.

"I need help."

Erwin took me in his arms. He kissed me.

"I'm so glad you feel that this is the right way," he spoke softly, "but I will always help you, Ginny."

I cried in sorrow and regret, I felt so old.

My mother knew something was wrong and wanted to send me to a psychiatrist. This was a very clever move. After the ordeal in the mushroom farm, where Tony had refused to kill me, my mother kept repeating that sooner or later I would talk. Now she had a golden opportunity to send me to one of her friend psychiatrists who would have me committed to a mental hospital. This would take away the danger indeed because who would believe a nutcase? I was smart enough to parry her move by taking the initiative myself.

The morning after I talked to Erwin about getting help I wrote the following letter to the centre for relational and sexual therapy in Ghent.

Dear Sir, Madam,

A short while ago I realized that I suffer from the consequences of a difficult childhood. My parents hadn't had time for me and an older man took advantage of this. He abused me for many years. I don't know if I say it the right way but this is how I feel about it. I don't know how I can live with it. Can you help me?

Two days later I got an answer. Carla, a therapist from the centre wanted to make an appointment with me. I called nervously, fixed the date and could hardly wait until the day came. Carla was a pleasant, somewhat distant woman. She was very calm and listened with great interest to what I had to tell. Carefully choosing my words, I said that I supposed that Tony had taken advantage of my dependence, and that I felt this was the cause of my many problems. When she told me that my story showed obvious sexual abuse, a very heavy weight was lifted from my shoulders. Somebody really believed me. I had always thought I didn't have the right to complain about my youth! She explained to me that with her help I could learn how to cope with my traumatic experiences and come to terms with the past, making it part of my life so nothing could prevent me from enhancing the quality of my life. It surely sounded simpler than it would appear to be.

That night I came home, opened a can of beer and sat down on my trusted windowsill feeling light as a feather. I had always thought that therapy was humiliating, something for nutcases, but now I looked at it in a totally different way. And what surprised me most of all was that my therapist didn't even seem to think I was being ridiculous. She took my problems seriously and that meant a lot to me. I wasn't insane; what I felt was normal. Someone had abused me and that was bad. My life's history wasn't as self-evident as I had always believed.

I told Carla I didn't know where to start, which events I had to come to terms with first. Tony, my mother's lover, started abusing me when I was twelve. I still had memories from when I was even younger but they were very faint and I didn't want to recall them. I wished I could say: look, this is my story, do something with it. Every time I came to see her, I played the smooth girl, as if nothing had happened. When she asked me if everything was OK, I always said yes. I loved to tell her I wasn't doing well at all but I didn't. I got more depressed every day. Legions of feelings were taking me by storm and I couldn't handle them! In the morning I had to force myself to get up, encouraging myself: "Come on Ginny, get up dammit, get out of bed, put your clothes on, be brave!"

My house was a mess, and every time I looked at it I hated myself, because I totally failed as a housewife, I was good for nothing. I felt awful, discouraged, wanted to pick up a can of lemonade and burst into tears. I wanted to get out of this body of mine, crawl out of my skin, flee from that miserable human being I was. All of a sudden I became so angry with myself that I broke a glass and cut my arm with a fragment. I hated myself, yelled at my own skin: "Go away, go away!"

The blood ran down my arms but I didn't feel any pain. I was angry but sad because I was locked into this dirty body of a whore. I sank to the ground and leaned against the cupboard, crying, I felt so damned helpless, desperate, and lonely. Blood dripped onto my jeans and red spots appeared. They mixed with the dark circles created by my tears, litres of tears. I wanted to die. And yet, I didn't slash my wrists. And I didn't take pills, because deep inside I wanted to live. I just wanted to be rescued from this hopeless, desperate world of severe depressions and nightmares that seemed almost real. The blood clotted, the cuts stopped bleeding. Expressionless I stared at my wounds. I didn't feel any pain, because this wasn't my body. It couldn't be, my body had died a long time ago. My body belonged to a girl, so young, so happy. A girl that cheered and laughed running through the waves, cleverly avoiding the jellyfish. But the nights?

What nights?

A zipper was opened, ritsj...

"Mmmh, oooh, yeah!"

A bitter disgusting taste.

Help, help, help! A male voice, the local dialect, rough, hard.

"Shut up, open your legs!"

I shook my head, trying to repel these images. Tears flowed down my cheeks. Why? Why did these images cross my mind? Why, why, why? I never received an answer. He loved me. Or didn't he, but just pretended? Was I pretty? What's so pretty about a scared little mouse, a girl shivering and crying under his weight? No answer.

Could it be true that he broke me because he liked it, just for the kick? Maybe that was the truth, but God, I didn't want to hear the truth! I put both my hands over my ears, but the voices were in my head, I couldn't stop them. My head was going to explode. Voices, memories, they got all mixed up and drove me crazy.

"You fuck well for an amateur."

Money from the wallet; dirty money on the bedside cabinet. What do I do with it? What's it for? What does 'fuck' mean? What are you if you're not an amateur?

Whore!

I decided I couldn't stay home alone all day because I would definitely commit suicide so I took up a job as a volunteer in "Against her will" (also called Women Against Rape or WAR), an organisation that supported abused women and children. My mother didn't like this at all because I became really dangerous now. But she was lucky. In January 1989 Erwin had to do his military service, which would last for six months. After basic training he could serve in Ghent though. He was allowed to come home in the evening and thus I would only be alone at night for a few weeks. My mother seemed really worried about me. She had a telephone installed in my house and a spare key made.

"You never know what could happen." She said and I started to believe she really started caring.

A little later I heard noise at my front door. I went to look what was happening.

"Hi pittimouse!"

There he was, Tony! He had received the spare key. He immediately came towards me and started fondling me. I was totally thrown off balance and didn't dare to react. It's strange that codes that have been drilled into someone's brain can work that long. And

then he raped me. This was a warning. I didn't have the courage to tell Erwin because I didn't want to lose the only human being who loved me. So I suppressed the feelings once more.

Carla invited me to an incest-view day in April 1989. The entire day we could watch videos on the subject, with debates and workshops. Maybe I could meet other victims. I really wanted to meet people with whom I could talk about sexual abuse. People who believed me, who felt what I felt. I wanted to break out of my isolation. Oh sure, I had friends, but they didn't know the real me. They merely saw my act, the "normal" Ginny. They couldn't understand that I got the creeps at the word "sex" and that I didn't like to be touched. I got startled, ran off, got angry, showed a fighting spirit and moments later I became submissive. They couldn't understand it, neither could I.

When I entered the meeting-room I suddenly realised that I wasn't just a spectator. These things had really happened to me. My brain's icy crust started to melt. Thoughts started seeping through. I suddenly got a flashback.

I saw myself tied to the bed. I didn't dare to moan.

"I have a toy for you honey!"

I didn't want to, but mesmerized I looked at his thing, hard and stiff. Oh God, please, I don't want to! Abused. Don't want, has to. Not able to, do it.

But what now, how would I go on? I wanted to meet people who managed to cope. I wanted to know if there was a way out. And I entered the room faint-hearted. I was confronted with films making me realise how bad it had really been. I heard women tell they had to endure so much pain and sorrow that they couldn't adapt to a new life. Just like me. Women were telling how they started taking the attitude of a whore not knowing how to receive love otherwise. Just like me. So many shared feelings, so many tragedies in women's hearts. I shared their feelings and they shared mine. Because in the dark of the night we were crushed by a big man we loved so much, but who stuck his thing in our mouth as a reward. Daddy loves you.

All of a sudden I looked right in the eyes of a former teacher. My heart missed a beat.

"Hi, what are you doing here?"

I swallowed. I had been sexually exploited, I was an incest victim, a child prostitute, a man's trashcan, and you, you have the nerve to ask me what I'm doing here? You never wondered what was wrong didn't you?

"I am... I am an incest victim."

"I thought so."

I thought so? Why didn't you help me, then? What a humiliation. I was losing my pride. I bowed my head. I was so ashamed, ashamed because now she knew what happened at night, how filthy I was. A whore!

Fortunately she started talking to someone else and I got away. A little later everyone shuffled back into the room. A panel discussion started and I hid way in the back. The discussion was captivating and before I knew what I was doing I asked a question. And I got an answer. Strengthened by the positive reaction I asked a second question. I was part of the discussion now. I forgot my shame, I listened attentively, I answered and I asked. To finish the viewing day we watched a video from Labyrinth, an informative program of

the Flemish television (Belgian TV in the Dutch language). It was the third time I saw this video. And the emotions started resurfacing.

I came home, exhausted, empty. I sat down in a chair, flabbergasted. So much had happened today. So many feelings had been awakened. I felt aggression, anger and helplessness. I was angry with my mother who had never hugged me, comforted me or supported me. I was mad, raging mad at *him*, because he had taken everything away from me; my childhood, my youth, and my future. And as I now came to realize, it wasn't even out of love, it was the lust for power, the kick.

I felt a primordial scream come out my throat, the kind of scream a Neanderthal man must have shouted when he attacked a mammoth. The kind of scream that bundled all my aggression and gave me the strength to attack everybody I hated. But instead, I crawled in my corner, wiped off the tears and snot, shivering. I wished I were able to put up a fight, I wished I dared to do it. But I remained a victim, bowing her head, closing off her mind, her body cramped, powerless.

You have to chase away that victim's attitude, orate the intelligent professors. But I had been terrorized as long as I could remember.

Twenty years of fear, pain, humiliation, sex...

Twenty years? Ginny, give me a break!

"What about Knokke?" said the voices.

Shut up! Keep that door closed!!!

I covered my ears with my hands again. Shut up, please! I hated these voices in my head!

"Open your legs!"

"Tony, no..."

"Open them, goddammit!"

"..."

Whamm, smash, my head gets dizzy. I taste blood. I spread my legs.

Next scene:

"She's yours for fifteen-thousand."

"She's only worth ten."

"Okay, but just half an hour, not a minute longer!"

"Everything's allowed?"

"Of course, but she still has to be able to work tonight!"

"Fine."

I wished I could get high, a good shot to float away, far from here. Would death bring peace and rest?

27. Disoriented and Confused

After one year of living together, my confusion, my memories and my reaction to it, had put a heavy strain on our marriage. Erwin didn't leave me, but I often had the feeling that

he merely stayed with me out of pity. I was in such a state that I couldn't possibly take care of myself. Living on my own would have been impossible. The only thing I had to offer was sex, but that too became more difficult each day. When we made love the flashbacks came and I couldn't enjoy it. Every touch seemed threatening although Erwin caressed me in a soft and friendly way. I loved lying close to him in the sofa, almost purring like a cat. We stayed like this the entire evening. It was great, just because it didn't go any further. But then we went to bed. Erwin put the parrot in its cage, and I dove under the blankets as fast as I could. He turned off the light; I hated dark rooms. When he started caressing my breasts I got that sickly feeling again, that anxiety. My heartbeat accelerated, my throat constricted. When his lips touched my breasts I froze and tried to think of something else. Noooo!!! Think of something, quick! I started panicking; my body stiffened. My hands became fists; my fingernails pricked into the palm of my hands. I bit my lip and cold sweat broke out. I yelled silently, please don't touch me, please stop it. Stop it, stop it, stop it, stop it, STOP IT! I made a faint gesture of displeasure, just enough to make him look up.

"What's the matter, Ginny?" Oh God, why am I doing this? Why can't I let him have his way?

"Nothing, go on!" I swallowed with difficulty.

And then the flashbacks came.

"Hey girl, I know you. Aren't you in the mood?" I dove away. Tony hit my head real hard, threw me into the seat and pulled my legs apart.

"I'll tame you, bitch!" He held a knife at my throat, while his left hand pushed deep inside me.

"Ginny?"

I had to sit up, pushed Erwin off me. I could hardly breathe. What was the matter with me? Why did I keep seeing these images? They were so real that I had a hard time accepting they were from the past. It seemed as if it just happened.

"I...I can't tonight Winny," I whispered with a hoarse voice.

And again images flashed through my mind.

Tony turned me on my belly. I heard him grab my riding-whip from the table. I felt from the movement of his arm that he raised it very high, and then it came down on me, real hard. The first lashes were the worst. I could hardly breathe; every fibre in my body started revolting against the pain. Then I went into a trance. My back felt numb, I heard the whip come down but I didn't care anymore. I floated away, out of my body, out of my head. I didn't feel anything anymore.

I was so sorry. I wanted so badly to give Erwin what he liked. I wanted to be able to enjoy it, but I felt how an intense pain re-opened old wounds. I was angry, no, furious, because I was defenceless against those memories. The harder I pushed them away, the faster they took control of my mind again.

"Make love to me" I asked Erwin, hoping to chase the ghosts from my head. He shook his head.

"Never mind honey, you're not in the mood and it's too hot anyway."

My anger increased. I couldn't take it. I had to fuck, because later, when *he*'d show up...

I insisted, tears came to my eyes. Erwin refused.

“Don’t you dare get tense, bitch. Don’t you dare!”

He pushed the barrel of a rifle into my vagina. I moved back, it hurt, it was so painful. I bit my lip to keep the scream inside.

“Oh, little missy doesn’t want to play,” and he pushed harder. I moaned, grabbed the sheets, and threw my head backwards. Oh God, help me, help me please! It hurt so much. I slid off the bed, sneaked down the stairs. Pushed my face against the cool window. No tears, just a desperate sob. The pain – it hurt like hell – the despair, the solitude, the memories. I was shaking when I put on a record.

I cut into the flesh of my arm, slowly driving away the pain from my heart, until a dead silence remained. I wanted to run, to run, never to stop.

What have you done to me, Tony? What about me was so bad that you decided to lend me to other men, who beat me and tortured me, put their cock inside of me with a triumphant grin on their face? Why? What have I done to deserve such punishment? All I ever did was to love you...

Oh Daddy, where were you? Mommy, why did you turn around when Tony’s boss pulled up my skirt? You went out to get a bottle of wine; you were necking with Tony who told his boss with a big smile that he was fingering a professional pussy. Class, don’t you think? Where were you, Daddy, when I needed you the most?

Sometimes, when I saw my friends talking happily together, I wondered how they would react if they knew my true story. What would the people whom I encountered at these meetings say? I tried to imagine what my teachers thought about me when I went “nuts” again. Was I insane? I couldn’t stop asking myself. I didn’t know. There was that contest at the riding-school, I won a prize, a nice cup and the man who handed it to me waited for the three kisses, a typical Belgian custom, that traditionally sealed this handing over. I bluntly refused. I didn’t want him to touch me. I could hear people whispering to one another: “She’s crazy”. But I just panicked. When a man walked straight up to me I ran away, when someone put his hand on my shoulders, I could hardly avoid screaming.

And I couldn’t even stand affection anymore. I hated hugs. When Erwin put his arm around me, I got a chill. I felt fear waking up. I got tense and pushed him away, abruptly. He then gave me a sad look and wandered off. And there was that guilty feeling again. I went after him and let him hug me, suppressing a scream at the moment he touched me. I couldn’t bear what I was craving for, to be loved, to be caressed.

I had to be insane, totally insane! Every hug awakened the pain from the past. Love made me feel what I had missed, attention made me suspicious. They had made me that way. I had loved but this cost me my body and my soul, I had hugged and as a reward I got a penis tearing me up inside. For a few moments of attention I had years of suffering. How could I show love, how could I receive love? How could I ever be happy?

I loved Erwin, at least I thought I did and that’s why I gave him my body. I made love with abandonment; I wanted him to be satisfied. Sex was the only thing they taught me, my sole means of expression. It’s all I had and all I was. But I loathed it. I wanted to learn how to caress, how to play, how to have fun. I wanted to explore, to feel, to sniff, to touch, to taste. I wanted to crawl away in a shell, in his arms, in his soul, in everything. I wanted to be Erwin, just for one moment, and experience the feelings I never knew. I

wanted to forget. I wished I didn't know sex, that I was an innocent girl. Do it again. Starting over. "Sex. Whore." That's exactly what I wanted to forget. When I made love to Erwin, even during those rare moments when I really liked it, I remembered those long nights, those men smelling of expensive cognac, talking like a sixteen year old to look cool. These images flashed through my head and made it just about impossible to enjoy Erwin's fondling.

I had to be insane. I desperately longed for love, for tenderness. But my skin crawled when Erwin approached me with open arms. I wanted lots of friends, because for so many years I didn't have any. But when my house was full, I couldn't breathe and I hoped everyone would leave soon. And all these many images that kept popping up in my mind, they were the main cause of my confusion.

I always looked behind me when I was out in the street. I really became paranoid. I got panic attacks when I was in the middle of a crowd, on the bus, in the movie theatre. Even a faint sound startled me. Was this insanity? I always thought insanity meant that one wasn't aware of anything anymore; that one fell into apathy. I refused to become insane because of what happened to me. I wanted to fight again; there had to be a way out!

I couldn't possibly be insane. I was just a girl, prematurely locked into a woman's body. I still dreamed of castles in the air, of gallant knights on horseback, of fairies and princesses. Please let me be a child for a short while, let me float on my childish fantasy. I have missed this for too long. I floated away, listening to the sounds in the street, to a place far away from my safe little house and I enjoyed the warm sunbeams on my neck.

I saw a little girl running on the beach, splashing in the water with her feet. She had curly gold brown hair and smiled as she threw her little arms into the air. The girl didn't feel lonely there, with the wind blowing through her hair and the sea curling around her legs, comforting her. The girl wasn't scared; there was no pain here, no peering eyes, touching hands, no commanding voice. Here was only the song of the seagulls, the rolling sound of the waves. The wet sand between her toes made her feel free and sharpened her senses. She heard more, saw everything – even the little crab trying to find its way through the cracks of the breakwater. She felt how the salty air called her "Come on little girl, fly away, flee, run until your mind is far away..."

Why was I such a weird child? A perfect child that shook hands with a nice smile, while her heart was filled with pain and loneliness. Why did I accept Tony's dominance without resisting? I browsed through my mind, desperately seeking an answer.

Again and again at night, when Erwin was fast asleep beside me, I got that overwhelming feeling that I was being touched, and touched, and touched by a thousand hands. I couldn't stand hands on my body anymore. There had been too many. Hands, mean, dirty hands that groped under my sweater, over my buttocks, slowly into my panties. Hands that treated me roughly, grabbed my breasts, mean and hard. Hands that stripped me naked, fingered my body. Hands that had power. Hands that went inside of me like big hairy spiders, ripped me apart, filled me with disgust...

I hated hands. When people were talking using a lot of gestures, I became fixated on their hands, got uneasy and thought: there we go again, they'll start touching me any minute! I hated those big male hands; I hated their fingers, their nails that pierced my skin, their filthy index and middle finger, yellow from nicotine. A man's hand is never tender. Male

hands hit, claw, pull your legs apart. Male hands are strong and merciless. They grab your throat and squeeze your mouth closed. When you're lying on a bed, helpless, one hand keeping your mouth closed, another hand under your clothes, the only thing you see and feel are those hands. And nowhere around are hands that save, comfort, caress. Hands everywhere. On your legs, belly, buttocks, breasts. They're all over. And there is silence. In your head, heart, belly, throat. There's loneliness in your soul. There are tears, deep in your eyes. And your own two hands are powerless, weak, limp, and useless, except to collect your clothes. God, I wanted to hug myself, comfort myself, and rock myself. I wished somebody would use his hands at this very moment, to embrace me. Where were the good hands? Where did they go? I caressed my body, trying to establish contact. I touched my breasts, my belly, and my legs.

"Body, where are you?"

I tried to remember what I liked as a child, how I was cherished? I didn't remember anything. I had never been hugged. There must have been at least something? But there was nothing, no fights, no highs or lows, no hugs, nothing. It was toneless, without a ripple. I was a shade, I am a shade! And in the middle of the night I tried to experience feelings. My body was a machine, it functioned, but it didn't feel anything, it was dead, clinically dead. Where was the warmth, the butterflies in the belly? Where did I stop living and when? Why did they leave me alive? Why didn't I die the first time I was "taken"?

Oh Erwin, I wish I could sleep and dream the way you do, with a new muffler for the car as the most important problem. I wish I could shed my skin like the lizards do, start all over again. A new skin, a new untainted face. Live my life a second time. I felt cast away, insignificant. A deep hole opened.

In October 1989 after nearly a year and a half, my first therapist's role seemed finished. I had already felt for a long time that something was very wrong with me, and that it was different from the other victims' problems. My moods changed rapidly, I couldn't make a decision – not even about the colour of the wallpaper – without lengthy discussions with the voices in my head. My behaviour could switch from submissive to almost male aggressive, on the spur of the moment. I reacted to different names. I couldn't write a single page without changing styles at least three times. One moment I was wearing a leather jacket, cowboy boots and jeans, and immediately after, I changed into girl's clothes or dressed up like a whore. I lost track of time, time that had been used by "somebody else", as if they borrowed my body.

What did this mean? Was I a schizophrenic? My therapist didn't answer my questions. I looked for literature on this subject, because it felt as if more than one person lived inside of me. What? Hell no, it looked as if a hundred persons lived in my body! I was relieved when it appeared that schizophrenia didn't fit my profile. It had to be something else.

One day someone from the support group for incest victims lent me the book "The three faces of Eve". I read it with growing interest. It told the story of a woman who had split herself into three personalities to survive the prolonged sexual abuse that she had undergone. The book had been written by a therapist who had followed her for many years, and because of this the character didn't totally match with what I felt, but it came close enough.

I talked about it with my therapist but she rejected my recognition. My childhood had been too good to make me split, she said dryly. And that was the second point on which I disagreed with her. How could she say that I had a good childhood? We hadn't even talked about it! It made me think. I had hoped that one way or another she would have understood the signals I was transmitting. But she didn't. I felt betrayed. As a therapist she should have understood the signals. Within a few weeks time I had the impression that she ignored my feelings in exactly the same way my parents and my grandmother had done. I wanted to talk about multiple personalities but she refused. I wanted to talk about my childhood and she cut me off by pointing at my problem-free years as a child. The trust was gone. I didn't make new appointments, stayed behind alone, but determined to recover. I thought I could handle this by myself. And it worked...for a while.

28. Eli, our son

It happened in the fall of 1989. I looked at the gynaecologist in disbelief. Only one week ago she had told me that Erwin had a severely reduced fertility and would probably not be able to father children. We had had a long discussion and Erwin couldn't accept the idea yet of having to adopt children. I couldn't wait to have kids. I wanted to fill up the emptiness and missed my deceased children so badly, but I understood that Erwin had to go through a period of mourning first. He was very disappointed that he was the cause of the problem and that he was powerless to do anything about it. But I felt nauseous and had passed out a few times that week. I felt sick and listless and wondered if this was caused by the fertility drugs I had taken for several months. The gynaecologist took a urine-sample and I went into the waiting room. A few minutes later she beckoned me to come into her speaking-room. I sat down. She kept looking at me, shook her head and started laughing.

"Congratulations" she laughed, "You are pregnant!"

I didn't react. I had heard the words of course but the significance didn't reach me but a few moments later.

"I am what?" I asked in disbelief.

Only then I started laughing too. I jumped up, spun around and danced a few steps of joy. She had no explanation for this little miracle, but why would she. I was pregnant! Finally life was growing inside of me again! My heart filled with pride.

Erwin hugged me when I told him the happy news in the evening. In both of us the hope started growing that the bad times were finally behind us. I wanted to be fat this time. I wanted the entire world to see that I was pregnant. I wanted to show off my big belly! So I ate kilos of candy and biscuits. I compensated for everything I had ever avoided in order to hide my pregnancy. I bought pregnancy clothes, ate ice cream at three in the morning, dragged Erwin out of bed to go get me fries; he sighed. But it worked, my belly got colossal. Near the end I waddled like a duck, but oh God, was I happy. I could shout it from the rooftops and beamed every time someone looked at my belly.

And then came the day of delivery. This was the first time I would give birth in a hospital. I didn't really like the idea but I felt safe as long as Erwin held me close to him. Labour was induced, that was the agreement with the gynaecologist. I was indeed terrified of doctors and strangers and I wanted to give birth with as few people around as possible. Pain went up and down just like the waves of the sea. But the pains suddenly unlocked hidden memories. And I hadn't reckoned with them at all.

All of a sudden I saw them come in again, Pèpère, the baron, the brothers. I was back in Knokke at my grandmother's house and they started hurting me. I cried, called my Mommy but they just beat me. These terrible memories were back and sent me into a panic.

Then I heard Erwin shout at me. "Come on Ginny, you're almost there! Be strong girl, a little more and our baby will be in your arms!" And with a last desperate effort, I pushed Eli out of my body. A steaming, sweet smelling little human bundle slid across my belly and crying and laughing at the same time I pulled him towards me.

"Hello Eli, hello my sweet, beautiful son!" I greeted him and kissed his sticky hair. Erwin too was crying, and caressed our baby son with his shaking big male fingers. The midwife and the gynaecologist moved away for a little while and for a very short time the world disappeared and there were only the three of us, our triple alliance. Never ever would I let this child be taken away from me. It was the third of July 1990.

We had chosen a Jewish name, Eli. The night after the delivery I took Eli in bed with me. I couldn't stand the thought that he would be in his cradle unguarded. My traumatic experience when Cheyenne disappeared was very much present in my mind. The thought of her empty cradle made me panic. When I was asleep someone might take Eli away. The nurse mumbled angrily that I should put my baby in a separate room. She thought I should rest and said I spoiled my baby too much cherishing him like that. For a second or two I wanted to obey but then I shook my head. Forget it, I'm keeping this baby in my arms; no one will take my baby away from me again!

The next morning already I packed my suitcase. Erwin tried to convince me that it was much too early to go home but I didn't want to stay at the hospital any longer. I got really upset when a nurse or a doctor wanted to touch my son to take care of him, and I wanted to lock myself up with my baby, ready to defend him against all the evil and mischief in the world. The wild she-wolf in me had broken loose, a force to be reckoned with. I would protect the baby at all cost. I was ready to die fighting for him.

Love had been preserved inside of me. For him, for Eli, I felt all the love I had in me. We slept together. I fed him tenderly and felt tears of joy in my heart every time he held my breast in his tiny little fists. In him I recognized the faces of Cheyenne, Eliah, Tiu, Nanook. He was everything I still wanted to live for. And Eli grew, learned how to laugh, and cooed a greeting sound when he opened his eyes. I cherished his laughter, breathed in his divine baby smell every day. My heart was filled with the joy of his arrival.

I had gotten fat. In a mere nine months I had gained twenty kilos, but I didn't care about it. I didn't want to be attractive at all, on the contrary. The less men looked at me the better. My beauty, my youth, it all belonged to my son now. My life wasn't the most important thing anymore. I went through an extremely difficult period. My mother in law had whispered in Erwin's ear that I suffered from post-natal depression. How could she

know that I was scared to death that, one morning, Eli would be gone? I couldn't sleep anymore, watched over my son in an unhealthy obsessive way.

After three months I was totally burned out. The household chores didn't get done because I stayed in bed with Eli, exhausted. I was afraid to leave the house because of the feeling that somebody would take Eli, grab him out of his baby carriage. Fear paralysed me and kept me between the four walls of my house.

The past often came back to me, just like a boomerang. The harder I tried to lock out the past, the more intense I relived certain episodes. I woke up terrified two to three times a night after having nightmares. My grandmother occupied an increasing part of my emotional life.

How she taught me how to do a blowjob on a bottle of lemonade. The pieces of the puzzle, in which I had divided my memories of the past, came slowly back together. In my head I started overseeing larger parts of the puzzle. Images that hadn't been clear to me before, suddenly fell in their place.

Two years old, how my grandmother took a hotel guest to my room. How he spread my legs and fondled my genital area while I froze and couldn't make a sound. Three years old, how my grandmother hit my fingers with an iron ruler because I hadn't satisfactorily masturbated a customer. Four years, how her doctor anally raped me while she and three other men held me because I fought, kicked and floundered to escape their abuse. How they beat me and kicked me in the lower back until, crying from anger and helplessness, I had to let them do their thing one after the other. How that day my resistance was basically broken because I was taught a cruel lesson. The more you resisted, the more painful it became. And you could never win.

The mix of voices in my head came into sharper focus every day. I recognized voices of my alter egos, whom I had forgotten a long time ago. They told what happened to them – to me. I couldn't control them. They just popped up, the persons I had created to please adults who demanded impossible things from me. What was impossible? Have sex with them, make them get off with that too little a body of mine. Lonely, Nobody, Nameless... my earliest protectors. They were the adult alter egos, the first ones comforting me when I lay hurt and disturbed in my little bed.

"Hey little girl, stop crying. The next time someone touches you, hide safely under our coat. Lonely will plug your ears, Nobody will rock you to sleep and Nameless will undergo the abuse..."

After all these years, while I was holding Eli close to me during the night, I heard their warm and familiar voices again. Forgotten long ago, I immediately recognized them. But nevertheless these voices scared me. This wasn't normal, was it? If you heard voices in your head, talked to them, listened to them, didn't that mean that you were crazy?

The voices asked me if it surprised me that I split myself into different personalities. If it was so crazy to create entities that did protect me, comforted me, helped me. If it was abnormal to protect the little abused girl in me, by encapsulating her, surrounded by alters who could help absorb the dire misery of her life. It felt weird to hear voices, to feel that you were composed of several personalities, but what they said didn't sound crazy at all. It sounded like this was the only right thing to do. I couldn't flee but I was indeed able to hide inside my own head!

The fact that I had a baby again made me very vulnerable, as I would find out soon. Not long after Eli's birth I suddenly heard the front door opening. I knew the typical squeaking sound. Was Erwin home already? I tiptoed towards the living-room door, so I didn't wake up Eli, and opened the door. It wasn't Erwin but Tony who stood in front of me and he wasn't alone. He had brought a "guard dog" with him. Erwin had taken a job as a truck driver and wouldn't come home until very late in the evening.

"Hi pussycat." He said.

Paralysis. Agony. Obedience

I looked at him, flabbergasted, paralysed with fear mixed with submission after my eyes and brain had registered him. I took a step back, he entered, looked at my breasts full of desire. My throat had contracted, tears came to my eyes. A feeling of panic spread through my body. But in a split second, Whore, the alter who best knew Tony and stood the best chance of pleasing him, took over from me.

Eli! He had to focus on me, he couldn't hurt my baby! So I sank on my knees, bowed my head obediently. Now Tony was the God, the pimp, the one who decided, acted and ruled.

"Suck me," he said calmly.

When it was finished Tony told me I had to come along with him. If I were good nothing would happen to my baby. Otherwise, you know, accidents happen. Little Eli might die from crib death. I didn't know what to do. I was terrified they would hurt my baby and after a long hesitation I agreed to come along. The "guard dog" would stay at my house to "watch" my baby. And Tony took me to a sex-party where I had to abuse children. He then brought me back home. I was terrified because I expected Eli to be gone but miraculously my baby was all right. But I had received a serious warning, open your mouth and your baby dies! When Erwin came finally home I thought I was going to die but I didn't say anything.

And life went on. I didn't see Tony for a long time. I hoped he would forget me, but I would find out later that my mother kept him well informed. When the police would search his apartment much later they would find birth announcements of my children. My mother had sent them to him! I still worked at "Against her will" but I had a paid full time job now and I had to put Eli in day-care centre in Ghent. I didn't like leaving him there. Not long afterwards I got pregnant again and on 18 July 1991 Eli got a little sister: Yentl.

29. Bee Heyse

Near the end of 1991 I lost my job at "Against her will" because the government had cut subsidies. I was disappointed but happy at the same time because I could stay at home now and didn't have to put my children in a day-care centre anymore. Although the centre was all right I felt much better. It was December 1991 when I heard someone knocking at the front door. I opened and I gasped for breath. It was Tony and of course he was not alone. The guy with the tattoos who had also been present at Chrissie's murder at the

mushroom farm was with him this time. Erwin was on the road driving his truck and wouldn't come home until very late at night. My mother kept Tony very well informed. "Hi pussycat." He said.

The two men entered my house and Tony told me I had to come along with him again. If I were good nothing would happen to my kids. Otherwise, you know, accidents happen. Little Yentl might die from crib death. I didn't know what to do. I know, people have asked me why I didn't tell the police, but there had been policemen among my abusers and I was afraid of them. At the same time I was convinced that I would be thrown in prison myself and on top of that my mother kept repeating me that I had to be nice to Tony because she loved him so much and didn't want him to dump her. I was terrified they would hurt my kids and after a long hesitation I agreed to come along. The "guard dog" would stay at my house again to "watch" the kids. I'd find out later that he took nude pictures of them. Tony drove towards Antwerp asking me if I wasn't too young to have a family. He told me that it wasn't too late to come back into the "group" and that it wouldn't be hard to "take care" of my children. He thought he was being funny. We arrived at a little castle that I would later recognise, as the "Kattenhof" in 's Gravenwezel, east of Antwerp. I didn't know that I was considered a high risk factor for the network because I was writing down my experiences as part of my therapy, and I had acquired a lot of acquaintances through my job at "Against her will". They knew all of that through my mother. They were afraid that sooner or later I would talk and thus they had decided to make me an accomplice. They would go far beyond child abuse now, as I would soon find out. Several people of my network were already present, Mich, Annie, Michael the lawyer, a businessman, Paul the politician and a few others.

Mich asked me if I knew why I was there. He told me I had to learn something. If I did all right, I would be allowed to return to my children, otherwise ... The group left the castle and walked towards one of the adjacent buildings. There I noticed a young girl named Catherine. Her hair had just been washed, I could smell the shampoo. She was very scared. Tony asked me to make love to her. When I refused he grabbed a mobile phone and started dialling my number. He told me that if my phone rang at home, his friend would make sure that Yentl would die from crib death. This put me in total panic; I couldn't lose another child. And I finally accepted to do what they told me to. Catherine was terrified so I told her in a very soft voice to relax as much as she could. But sex wasn't enough. They started torturing Catherine and wanted me to join. When I refused Tony started dialling my number again shouting:

"Last chance Gina, I'm counting until three. One, two, ... "

Totally crushed and confused I gave in. I looked at Catherine and said: "I'm sorry." And then we killed her. I was an accomplice now. I was convinced that if I went to the police I would certainly be arrested. And my children would be put in an institution and probably end up in the network. Tony had won. I wanted to die but when I came home and took Yentl in my arms, I realised I had to stay with my children. It was my duty to give them a life.

From time to time, sometimes after long intervals, Tony came back to get me and made me participate at sex parties in the castle. It was clear that they didn't really want me to be a regular member of the network but they wanted to keep me under control. But what terrified me was that I realised that sooner or later my children might be drawn into it.

Because of all of this the flashbacks kept haunting me and I was only able to sleep a couple hours a night. I hadn't told anything about it to Erwin and this created an immense emotional conflict inside of me. I realised I wouldn't be able to cope with this alone. I needed help. After a long hesitation I made an appointment with Beatrice (Bee) Heyse, a therapist whom I knew had experience with patients with split personalities. A few weeks later I sat down for the first time in that little chair in which I would feel so comfortable for years to come. I liked Bee immediately. She was a down-to-earth, serene woman, who didn't give me an uneasy or sceptical look when I told her I had DIS, and also that I had been used as a child prostitute from a very young age. I told her that I didn't want hypnosis. I wanted to remember in a conscious way, without tricks, and I didn't like those hazy methods like reincarnation and dream-interpretation. She laughed heartily and reassured me by telling me it was not her style. She appeared to be realistic and pragmatic and that was exactly what I wanted. Because there was one thing I knew for sure: I had been severely abused in a children's prostitution network and that was damn real!

Every week I talked to Bee about my doubts, fears and sorrow. I was not able to tell what really happened, I could only write it down and often I re-read, confused and depressed, what I had written. These scenes were so cruel. I shuddered at my very own memories. It was crazy, as long as they were inside my head I could still handle them but when they were written on paper in black and white it stung me to the heart. I couldn't hide from them anymore. What had been done to me was simply appalling.

I happened to look at the few pictures from my childhood I had kept. I tried to reconstruct, to find out what was hidden behind this laughing little face. And I was shocked when I remembered that I used to start smiling again immediately after having closed the bedroom door behind me. When I came downstairs the abuse was almost suppressed. And by the time I was out in the garden at the pond with the goldfish, the abuse had only taken place in a dark corner of my soul.

I tried to understand why I reacted so slavishly. Did codes exist? Could humans be trained like Pavlov's dogs? Strange, when the telephone rang once and then stopped I still got nervous, expecting to be picked up by a car with chauffeur within the next half hour. I remembered the small round whistle. When they blew it I knew the pain would stop because I had done my best. A snap with the fingers meant that I had to open my legs. But why did I let Tony in while my entire body protested?

Honour your father and your mother. The ancient code! The code that made me execute immediately the orders from ... no! I can't, I may not do it! I can't think of ... oh God, dear God! My entire body started shaking. I crawled into a corner and buried my head in my arms. Somewhere far away, in the living room that was at least three thousand meters away from me, my little kids were playing. Pushed by an irresistible force, something I couldn't oppose, I grabbed the razorblades that I hid in a drawer. I had to cut myself as punishment for almost thinking about things that had to remain a secret. Because I was disobedient, and disobedient children had to be punished. Disobedient children had to watch how their little bunny was skinned alive, or how other little children were being tortured, bled and screamed in pain because you had been bad.

I systematically cut line after line, blood was running along my arms, the drops spattered on the ground one after another and made surrealistic patterns on the tiles. I couldn't stop even though tears ran down my cheeks and an internal voice cried for help. I didn't want this but a mechanism had been started by God knows which thought or memory, that prevented me from stopping.

Horried I looked at the destruction on my arms. What had I done? Was I insane? Completely nuts? What was it that by simply allowing certain thoughts, took away my self-control and forced me to do such terrible things. And not only that...

I had to fight with all my strength to protect my children from me. Quite often I got ambushed by the feeling that it was high time to teach them about the real world, to make them strong... These thoughts scared me because they matched the sentences used by my grandmother to justify her evil deeds against me. Why did I sometimes think that way? I wanted to love my kids, protect them, and offer them a childhood where warmth and the sense of security were central elements. That's what I really wanted, but nevertheless I sometimes felt the urge to take up the thread and adopt the role of my grandmother. As if the circle of violence couldn't be broken.

My mother wanted to see the children. I obeyed. Why, for heaven's sake? Why was I such a coward, so docile? I prayed and tried to overcome my anxiety. Mothers and fathers love their children and grandchildren. How could I be so disrespectful to even think they would hurt them? Exhausted by this inner struggle, I slid into my next depression. I got up, switched on my automatic pilot and took care of the kids, I smiled, I laughed, I acted, but got sucked into a marsh full of memories. I felt guilty...wished to die. How long did this misery have to last? Bee looked at my arms with compassion. She accepted, didn't judge, but wanted to talk with me about what caused me to do this to myself again. Because I was guilty, because I wanted to be punished, because I wanted to leave this dead and raped body of mine, to release the sorrow and anger I couldn't utter... more than enough reasons to cut.

Sometimes it was an emergency brake when I was entrapped in memories and reliving experiences. This was a way to come back to reality. The pain calmed me, chased the ghosts from my mind. I tried to find other ways, less destructive ones, but nothing helped as much as carving into my arms, legs or belly. It was a cry for help with a big exclamation mark. Nobody in fact could help me really. The only thing they could do was give me enough time and space to recover from these enormous wounds.

Disapproving of the self-mutilation had just the opposite effect. I got an increased sense of guilt and wanted to punish myself even more. Bee realized this very well. It was better to keep the subject discussable, to grow slowly towards other solutions and finally to flatly forbid it. I had been carefully trained to endure pain. It became a way of life to me. Out of fear of becoming weaker and thus being more vulnerable, I often cut myself to keep my pain tolerance at a high level.

"Did they teach you to hurt yourself?" Bee asked me casually.

I broke out in cold sweat. It was forbidden to talk about such things, I felt Damocles' sword above my head. I dodged the question. There were things you couldn't speak about. How you were trained to endure pain, step by step, to do things so painful that you almost died inside but which you did anyway because you had to obey. How you carved

yourself, or raped yourself with an object even if you got the order over the phone. You did it because your master had given the order. I hated my docility but I couldn't help it. It became so bad that I missed many appointments with Bee, simply because my mind knew that going into therapy was treason. I was so tired ... so terribly tormented and exhausted, being thrown back and forth between giving in to my masters and opposing their orders they had instilled in my mind so carefully. I wished I could get strong enough to break the secrets that scared me so much, to fight them. Somewhere inside of me lived the alters who guarded the memories, who held the keys for breaking the codes.

After several weeks of absence I stepped into Bee's little room again. Slowly, bit-by-bit, I squeezed the words out of my mouth. I couldn't come Bee, because someone forbade me. My abusers had drilled it into me.

"Do you mean codes?" she asked.

"Yes", I answered seriously. Most of the time I laughed away my worries, but right now I was deadly serious.

"And I don't know how to oppose them."

There's only one thing we can do. Cope with them. Try to get all the alters together and have them share information. Try to become one. Stay in therapy. It could take years before I might be capable of breaking the codes they had instilled into my mind. But Bee gave me hope. There were things that could be done to block the orders, e.g. to teach the strongest alters to protect the weaker ones. To erect a screen in my head that disturbed the codes.

I shook my head.

"There's only one good solution," I sighed.

"Which one?" she asked.

"To fight, Bee," I replied, "To fight the assholes who did this to me."

And I tried. In 1993 I spoke to a well-known psychiatrist. She didn't believe that child prostitution networks were possible in Belgium. In 1994 I gave the addresses in Ghent where children were being picked up by their pimps to employees of "Against her will". They talked to the police, but the policemen refused to write down the information. They said they knew things were going on but they didn't want to risk their careers. I then talked myself to a police lieutenant, a nice guy, but he didn't want to write anything down either. It was a human reaction. They knew that this was not about a small supplier; this was big game hunting and it scared them to death. So I did talk to the police. But the result was and will always be the same: That's not possible, you made it all up. And is a career not much more important than a few little children being raped and tortured?

Full of anger I threw a glass against the wall. The anger in me was enormous. Because I was alone. Because I couldn't turn back time. Because everything I touched seemed to die. Because I was never good enough. Because not one of these goddamn people who took care of me, brought me up and trained me, allowed me to be good at something!

They meant so much to me ... my grandmother, my parents, Tony and the other abusers I grew up with. My entire life I had tried to win my Mommy, to prove to her that I was

worth loving. I tried really hard to be good at the things I had to do. I had been trying to call her: "Turn around Mommy and come to me!"

Every day I still longed for her, I wanted her to choose for me. If I let them go I would lose part of myself. I had Erwin and the kids, but I was afraid to get too attached to them. I still lived with the fear that tomorrow they would be gone. Tomorrow I'd wake up and find out that all of this was only a silly dream. That Tony would be sitting on my bed again telling me that there was another party coming. I couldn't run the risk of giving myself to them totally, because I couldn't cope with losing them. I was so scared, so terrified that my happiness was merely borrowed time. Just as Cheyenne had been borrowed time.

I closed my eyes. Why did I still live? Me, the only one who wanted to die so badly, who wanted to trade her life for those who could still laugh naturally and spontaneously? Why did I stay alive and not they? Why had I not been able to save them? I was twenty-five now, how long and for how many years did I still have to suffer, to wait until I could join them? The death, the place where I belonged, because I belonged with Cheyenne, with Clo, with all of these who died. And I felt so lonely, abandoned, because the ones who knew about my misery weren't there anymore, the ones who hurt me and could take the pain away still didn't love me. And whatever I did, my Mommy would never hold me, cherish me, and comfort me. I missed the Mommy she should have been so much. I missed my deceased little children. That empty feeling remained, even after I had my new kids. I couldn't replace my dead children. Emptiness stayed inside of me as if part of my heart and womb had been ripped out. How often did I think: She would have been fifteen now; and then I cut myself and ran off, fled, to avoid feeling the pain that overwhelmed me.

Would the pain never go away? Not even for a single day?

And again I cut myself. I had to because this was the only way I could show my immense sorrow. I had to because I didn't have any tears left.

Twenty-five years, a little heap of misery.

Tony still picked me up from time to time because he didn't want to lose control. And then I suddenly got this great idea. In September 1993 I started a dog-grooming parlour at home. I had a lot of experience because when I was still living with my parents I regularly had to take over from my mother when she was drunk again. Such a business would allow me to make some money while I was able to stay home with my kids. I hoped that the fact that customers would come with their dogs would make it impossible for Tony to force me to come with him. But in the beginning I had only one or two customers a day. My mother kept Tony well informed and he still managed to make me follow him. He even brought a young girlfriend along who could groom the dogs while I was away. But I got more customers and it became really difficult for Tony to come after me. I didn't see him for long periods in a row. And then I got pregnant again, and on 19 May 1994 Eli and Yentl got a little sister, Hannah. I had to take care of three children now and run my business in constant fear that Tony would show up again because my mother was still keeping him informed of what I was doing.

Bee let me in, I settled down in my chair in front of her. The memories from Knokke were breaking loose now and the divisions between my different alters had started weakening. The need to separate them to survive didn't really exist anymore. We had become strong enough to look back into the past. It was painful indeed but I noticed it was better to know than to live a lie. Everything I had become was in my past. I understood much better now why I had DIS and could accept it much easier.

"Will I stay like this?" I shot at her, together with "Will it get better?" and "Where do I go from here?"

She smiled at so many questions, questions that she must have heard probably a hundred times. But I could hardly believe her answer. Bee promised me it would get better, but it seemed to take so long. I couldn't wait to learn how to live, to leave my past behind, to merge with the anonymous crowd, to live a normal everyday life. I wanted to leave everything behind me so badly.

30. My grandmother's death

My grandmother had gotten too old to live alone in her big country house and the family had decided to move her into a home for the elderly in Ghent. In the beginning I had visited her a couple of times because my parents had put a high pressure on me, but I tried to get out of it whenever I could. Was I such a coward that I was afraid to confront her with what she put me through? On one hand, I couldn't stand being hypocritical any longer. On the other hand I was still very much afraid of her. All these years of drilling me hadn't missed their effect. And I also feared being rejected by the family, being cast off again if I told them what my grandmother had done to me. Thus I kept silent and avoided potential problems by simply not visiting her any longer. My parents disapproved of my behaviour, but I couldn't provide them with an explanation because I knew they would call me a liar. I knew they would choose her side, so I kept my mouth shut. I secretly hoped she would die soon since this would solve the problem. I felt how terrible my thoughts were but it looked like if this would finally liberate me a little bit. My grandmother's health declined rapidly. I heard it from the comments of the family members. They circled around her like vultures, or should I say around her bank account? In my head I saw pictures from my youth again. Her gruff voice resounded in my ears. When I closed my eyes I could see the little second kitchen, the beige cupboard with the glasses, her large medicine compartment, the compartment where she kept the honey cake, the compartment with the old Lego blocs. I saw the paintings, the old sofa, the tiles with the pattern, the plants in front of the window, the old sewing machine. Images from my childhood, images which, although innocent at first glance, were extremely painful. She would die shortly now, but for how many years would I have to carry this past with me?

The creaking of the bed in room six, the little reed bench with the plush red seat on which I had to sit, naked, so my customer could watch me. I wished I could cry, just once, or get really angry. I wished I could feel something. What have they done to me?

I was pregnant with our fourth child. I touched my belly with my hands and smiled quietly. I promised that I would take care of him, that I would be a good Mommy to him and his little brothers and sisters. He was welcome. And deep inside of me I hoped he would fill the void, the gaping hole they left when they took my first children away. I knew he would never be able to replace my other children. I also knew I couldn't ask him to do so, although I often looked at my children and tried to find a familiar feature in their face. But I hoped this baby would prove they hadn't been able to destroy me. I could have children; pass on my genes and my zest for life to the next generation. I hoped I could give them enough love to make them thrive.

June 1995. I heard a noise in the income hall. I was startled and went to the kitchen to grab a large meat knife. Tony was back, but this time he was alone. This was my chance. "Hi pussycat!" he said, with his arrogant smile.

I firmly grabbed the knife with both hands and pointed it in his direction.

"Go away or I'll kill you!"

"You'll go to jail pittimouse."

He smiled full of self-confidence that the codes would work again and that I would give in. But this time I didn't back off. If he had taken one more step I would have plunged the knife right into his heart. And he immediately understood that he had lost control and that I was going to attack him indeed. He turned around and stepped outside. This was the last time he harassed me. I would only see him again on 23 April 1998 during a terrible confrontation at the police station in Ghent.

Janek was born on 30 January 1996. He came into this world the day after my twenty-sixth birthday. My grandmother died one month later. They told me she died at the end of a week of terrible nightmares in which men persecuted her great-granddaughter. She was afraid and upset. She died with a heart full of fear. Maybe she was full of remorse of what she did to me. Maybe she had finally acquired a conscience. I don't know. But it seemed fair to me. People who treat children the way she did will inevitably, sooner or later, wake up at night bathed in sweat. The thought that so suddenly crossed my mind startled me. All these years, and I was an adult now and self-supporting, I had tried to ban all negative thoughts about my parents and my grandmother. I felt guilty if I thought about them in a negative way, but now that my grandmother had passed away, and the family was running back and forth to arrange the cremation and to distribute the assets and the money, I had mustered the courage to think of her in a logical and distant manner, for the first time in my life.

The evening after the cremation I wrote her a letter:

I was a girl, nothing special, not strikingly beautiful, but with a big smile and an insatiable hunger for learning. I was a girl who wanted to be loved, protected, and cherished. I saw how you loved my cousins, in particular Danny. I saw how nice you were to the children of your physical therapist. I always thought you treated me differently because in some way I was a naughty girl, or even a bad one. I thought I deserved the way you treated me!

During all those years I had this slumbering feeling of injustice that I didn't understand. Because deep in my heart, and sometimes I have to force myself to believe this, I knew I wasn't a bad kid. My crime couldn't possibly have been that bad to deserve such punishment.

Your disdain, your violations of my bodily integrity, the selling and lending out of a little body that wasn't yours... sometimes I ask myself bluntly if it's not your fault that I'm still in so much pain. Maybe I haven't done anything wrong at all.

Maybe it's you who did wrong.

Could this be the case?

I know it's disrespectful and rebellious to think of you this way now you're dead. But Grandma, I was simply too scared and cowardly to tell this to your face. You don't have any idea how much I still fear you, even now. But there is something I have to get off my chest. I have the feeling I will suffocate if I don't put this on paper.

You were a monster to me Grandma, cold and malicious. You used me as a puppet on a string. You abused me without remorse. During all those years nobody saw how I languished, became lonely. Everybody thought: oh well, she's just a quiet, precocious kid. And you watched carefully so I couldn't tell the truth.

The punishments up in the attic, the things I had to do in bed, the postcards my parents sent me but you never gave me, until years later, I discovered a shoebox full of old Walt Disney cards that had turned yellow.

You told me my parents didn't want me, that this was my punishment for being disobedient and bad. I wasn't allowed to wear the clothes they bought me. You turned my parents into strangers so I couldn't tell them my secret.

I know that my mother abused me, that she gave me to Tony. But I'm convinced she went through the same ordeal as me. I think you made her like that.

I don't love you Grandma, I never did. Our relationship was built on fear and obedience to avoid punishment, but I never loved you. I am glad you're dead. Sure, you had your good side, I'm not afraid to remember how good you could cook and the hundreds of stories and fairy tales you could tell in such a captivating way. But they don't compensate the pain you inflicted on me.

I really hope that during that last week before you died, you came to realize what you have done to me. I'm the last one now, the last witness of our family tragedy.

Spring was alternately beautiful and rainy. Baby Janek was cherished by his Daddy, brother, sisters and Mommy. Tony's threats seemed to float away further each day. I slowly started to believe that there was a future after all. I started allowing myself to love my family. I realized I couldn't keep them at a distance anymore, solely because I was afraid of losing them. It wasn't easy to lower my defences but more and more I could do it. I didn't try to understand why Tony stopped threatening me – I hadn't heard from him for several months now – but I was just grateful for every day he didn't harass me. The therapy was starting to bear fruit now. I felt a lot stronger than I used to.

I observed my family. More often than before a genuine smile appeared on my face when I looked at Erwin and the kids. I wanted to be different from my grandmother and my parents. I wanted to protect my children. I felt bitterness and anger come up again. I felt increasingly determined. Anyone who wanted to touch my children would have to defeat

me first. Anyone who wanted to threaten my children would have to kill me or be killed himself. Codes or not, I would fight. I knew where and how to inflict heavy wounds. I knew I had to use my knife just once, fast and in surprise, before it was used against me. I knew this because I learned everything from them. Maybe the time had come to use everything they taught me, against them.

The borders between the different alters had faded away. Our memory, once fragmented and preserved with separate entities, had come together again. From a splintered victim I grew into a more stable woman. Many alters were still present inside of me, but the huge differences had disappeared. We met each other in a natural way. We moved towards a core, a unity. We could feel how near the total integration had come. Bee felt this too, was proud of me, knew how hard we struggled to get cured. An enormous fire was growing inside of me, a force that sometimes scared me. It was the desire to live, to breathe, to break free.

That year, when spring seemed to explode, something inside of me seemed to explode too. After twenty-seven years, I got up for the first time without feeling this all-embracing pain. There were nights without nightmares, days without pain, not too many of them but I cherished these like precious diamonds. These are the days I wanted to remember when things would go bad again. I didn't cut myself as often either. Sometimes three to four weeks went by without self-mutilation. This was a real success; it proved to me I was slowly breaking loose from my abusers. I didn't notice this immediately, but a few months later I discovered I didn't have any feelings left for Tony. The devotion, the dependence, the fear, it was all gone. An immense weight lifted from my shoulders. I laughed and cried in my heart. All those years of fear, pain and oppression. All those long years that I carried my secret with me, that I had to confront my abusers alone, too scared to resist, too stubborn to abandon hope. All those years of loyalty. And this because he had washed my hair just once and had given me a sweet smile. Only now I had come to realize how desperately lonely I must have been, deprived of love, to give myself to such a cruel and sadistic man.

Erwin and I were getting to really know each other. Funny, considering we had been together so many years. But my love for him had really deepened. We talked a lot about our future. I told him with some hesitation that I was withering away in the city. I felt so imprisoned between the four walls of my little row house, with the small garden surrounded by two-meter high walls, which only allowed me to see the sky. I longed for quiet and space, chickens, rabbits, sheep ... I dreamed of a farm. He listened.

"But you have a business," he said, "and you worked so hard to build it up, are you going to abandon all of this?"

I shrugged my shoulders. I felt young, younger than I felt ten years ago. Why couldn't I start over? A hotel for dogs? I talked to dogs. I understood them better than humans. I was convinced I could handle this. Erwin caressed my head. He was more stable and down to earth than I was but he knew a city was not where I belonged.

"We'll look around," he promised.

End of Part One

Part Two: Witness X1

31. Little kids are disappearing

June - July 1996.

There had been a lot of news coverage about little kids, mostly girls, which had disappeared. Little Elisabeth had disappeared in December 1989 and her mother was still actively looking for her. Nathalie, twelve years old, disappeared in 1991. She was waiting for the bus near Leuven. Witnesses saw her get into a car. On 5 August 1992 Loubna, nine years old disappeared in Brussels when she returned from the supermarket. Kim, eleven years old and her little brother Ken, eight years old disappeared in Antwerp on 4 January 1994. On 24 June 1995 Julie and Melissa, both eight years old disappeared after they had been waving at cars from a bridge across the motorway near Liège. On 23 August 1995 An and Eefje, seventeen and nineteen years old disappeared after they attended a hypnosis show in Ostend. On 28 May 1996 Sabine rode her bike home from school in the village of Kain near the city of Tournai but she never arrived. It seemed as if the disappearances became more frequent. Many people started supporting the parents and there were posters with the children's faces everywhere. Big searches were organised. This was quite different from my friend, Clo, I thought. She had disappeared without a trace, without having been on a poster. Maybe this was the reason I hoped she was still alive. Had people changed? Why did these parents so stubbornly keep trying to find them?

"They're dead."

My friend looked at me. I had said this in a cold and toneless way and she was shocked.

"Why do you think that?"

I shrugged my shoulders. I just knew. Kids didn't just vanish, and certainly not in pairs. The picture looked familiar to me. I recognized little tell-tale signs from my network, small details, more a matter of feeling than of hard facts, but I knew there was no hope for these children.

"Do you think ... they ended up in a network?"

I nodded briefly. I could only hope that they hadn't suffered too much, that they hadn't lived very long. I was astonished about the parents of the kids who also got a face in the press, how more and more parents came together and asked for an explanation. This was so different. In the past you never heard the parents. Elisabeth, Nathalie, Loubna, one name after another hit the press. Kim and Ken. And again I felt this smarting pain. It continued, it never stopped. In a case of incest there is a real possibility that the offender stops when the child grows older because the child has been used up. There is no guarantee that the offender doesn't make victims outside of his family, but the chance that he just doesn't have the guts to do that is quite real. Abusers from networks will never stop. When a child is used up they eliminate it and get another one. I felt so powerless when I looked at the little faces on the posters. Nevertheless the parents of the

disappeared children kept me intrigued. Could it really be that they kept fighting so hard to find and save their children just because they loved them so much?

“Hi, I’m home!”

“Have you been out?” asked my mother.

She didn’t care where I was unless Tony needed me. It was totally new to me that parents took leave of absence and postponed their careers to look after their children. I watched them and I secretly wished that my parents had been like this. Should I tell someone what I went through? Should I go to the police again? I tried but they didn’t want to do anything. Would it help if I gave the names of some of my abusers? Fear paralysed me. I knew my abusers would find out that I turned them in. What would the reprisals be? Maybe the police knew everything already; I tried to ease my conscience. Maybe they were closing in on the network. These parents would certainly force the police to keep looking. I now realised that my parents’ reaction towards Tony, who had abused me so shamelessly, right under their nose, wasn’t normal. My father once told Erwin, when he asked them desperately what they had done to me to traumatize me so heavily:

“What the hell is she worried about? That was a long time ago!”

This was the first and the last time Erwin tried to confront them with their shortcomings. He was often furious because I didn’t want to break off the relationship with my parents, but I couldn’t. My mother’s health was deteriorating and I felt responsible for her well-being. If I broke with her she might die, and that was a risk I was not prepared to take. But I didn’t have the courage to talk to them about the past. Although Tony didn’t have any emotional grip on me anymore my parents still did. Every time I tried to steer the conversation towards my childhood, my mother became very emotional and the discussion usually ended with my apologies. And of course, at that time I didn’t know yet she was the reason why Tony knew everything about me, I’d find that out later.

Time after time they pointed out how good they had been to me, that they had given a lot to me – “Look, here’s some money”, – and that I should be grateful that they worked very hard their entire lives. If I dared to insinuate that money and material things weren’t everything in life, that I had lacked affection, my mother burst into tears.

“I have always done everything for you, everything!”

She pulled out hair with shaking hands. I immediately felt guilty.

“I knew that some day you would reproach me! I just knew it. I can never do anything good!”

“No Mommy, don’t do this. You’re right, it is my fault,” I stammered.

She went on with a quavering melodramatic voice.

“I’ve always wanted the best for you. You were such a difficult child. I never knew what to do to make you happy!”

The only thing you should have done was to love me Mommy, sincerely love me just like other mothers do. The way I love my children ...

“Mommy, I don’t want to hurt you, please stop crying. I know you did your best.”

Adult but still a child. I couldn’t attack my mother. She was gasping for breath, trembling while she tried to find her inhaler. I got really scared, if she got an attack it would definitely be my fault.

“Ma, please calm down. I didn’t mean it like that.”

“I ... am ... bad.”

She spit out the words while she was jerkily trying to breathe. It was a painful view. I didn't want to hurt her. I didn't even want to reproach her. I just wanted to talk about the pain that had been lacerating my heart for so many years, about the abnormal circumstances I grew up in. I wanted to talk to her about these terrible years, to find some support. I wanted a mother who listened to me ... just this once, listened to my pain and sorrow.

“You aren't bad Mommy,” I whispered defeated.

My father gave me a cold look. I made his wife miserable again; I could read from his eyes. Ungrateful bitch, said his body language. I bowed my head with sadness.

“You wanted all of that yourself,” he said shortly.

Yes, yes, dammit! I did love Tony at least that's what I thought. But where were you? Where was the Daddy I needed so much? Where were you when I was so lonely that I tried to find some comfort with a pimp? Why did you close your eyes to a secret you knew about but didn't want to face? Why did you do these things I'll never be able to forgive you? I turned around and disappeared like a wounded animal. I couldn't cry, I just couldn't anymore, my tears had dried up, turned into stone inside my heart. Why did I carry a secret that was too heavy for me? When would this nightmare be over?

My parents brought terror that was very subtle. It was a constant pressure to surrender. When I tried to address the problems caused by my past, they focused on their problems and on their, oh so unhappy, childhood. I didn't deny their problems. But what they did to me was really appalling. I got so tired of their lies, half-truths and distortions they hid the big secret in. They refused to admit to themselves that they failed miserably in their parental duties, and tried to convince me they were in the right. When I was with them and listened to them talking, I got almost hypnotized. They made me feel responsible again and again. If I didn't visit them, my mother called me on the phone.

“Regine, I haven't seen you for the entire week, is something the matter?”

“No Mommy.”

I couldn't tell her that in fact I wanted to get away from her, escape from her strangling, suffocating mental grip.

“When will you come?”

“I don't know yet.”

“Sunday I'll make dinner for all of you, is that OK? Are you coming?”

“All right mama.”

I felt frustrated when I put down the telephone.

For how many hours did I have to listen already about how things were when she was young and lived at Grandma's? How she went to boarding school and how Grandma was always angry with her. How she looked up to her father, how he took her along to the casino. How pretty she was. I listened for hours, paying attention, hoping to win her affection. Longing for that moment she would say: and now it's your turn to tell your story.

I was tired of all this and I didn't want my children to come under their influence. But I obeyed, protected them, and defended them. When Erwin commented on my parents I

tried to downplay their shortcomings, while my heart revolted. But I nervously suppressed the voice in my heart.

In the summer of 1996, one year after Tony's last threats, my healing process had really begun. I knew for the most part what had happened during my life, I was aware of the abuse I had had to endure and, during the past twelve months, I was able to liberate myself from that invisible emotional tie with Tony. This was a real achievement. I knew I was still too much under my parents' influence, my mother's in particular. I would have to break loose if I wanted to acquire my own identity. I couldn't keep denying my past, as they wanted me to. During that summer, just before the entire country got into turmoil when the two little girls, Sabine and Laetitia were found alive in Marc Dutroux' cellar, I felt reasonably happy. For the first time I dared to hope that everything was behind me for good. If I would have known what was going to come down on me...

32. Mich gets arrested

August 1996.

I didn't like to watch the news; I tried to close myself off from the world. But Erwin watched it every day and I then wandered around the house or the garden. On 15 August he suddenly called my name very loud almost like giving me an order. I ran towards the living room where Erwin had turned up the sound of the TV. I was perplexed and felt a mixture of tension, hope and emotion when I saw the images of two little girls coming out of a house, escorted by a dozen policemen and journalists. I watched them get into a car. I only heard snatches of the reporter's comments. Sabine who had been kidnapped three months ago and Laetitia who had disappeared a week before, had been rescued from Dutroux' cellar, I heard. Children who were doomed but now got liberated.

I ran to the bathroom, forgetting everything around me, leaned against the fresh enamel of the bathtub and covered my face with my hands. Oh God, dear God, thank you! And I cried without tears, I laughed without a smile on my face, my feelings were all-internal. But I was jubilant, exultant and thanked God that I could witness this. This was the moment I had looked forward to my entire life. This was the moment I had secretly hoped for as a child and as a young girl. I hoped the world would see in which a miserable situation I had lived. I hoped people would come to help me, to rescue me. That people would have come just in time to save Clo and all the others. That I wouldn't have been forced to see what happened to them. That it would have had a happy ending.

I was so happy for these little girls and my whole being desired to hug them and kiss them. Judge Connerotte and prosecutor Bourlet from the Neufchateau judicial district, whose team managed to locate the girls' hiding place, became the people's heroes, and they were my heroes too. I looked at their faces and would never forget them. I silently thanked them for their courage and competence. And I wanted to flee, but I kept staring at the TV, petrified, when Marc Dutroux was led through a howling crowd. I turned around, left Erwin behind, astonished and went outside into my small garden to take deep breaths. A big closet full of fear and memories had burst open. I yelled in silence.

Noooo! Go away, go away, go away! I didn't want this anymore! I couldn't take this anymore! I didn't want to remember anything! I closed off my mind and waited until the news was finished before I dared to sneak in again. Erwin looked at me, I didn't show any emotion.

"You're thinking about before, aren't you?" he asked.

I nodded but didn't say a word. It was still hard to talk about these things. The obligation of absolute silence, imposed by adults who had to hide their secret world, still put a crushing weight on my shoulders.

"Do you know him?" Erwin asked.

I quickly shrugged my shoulders. I didn't want to say anything because every answer raised a new question. Erwin couldn't get anything out of me anymore.

The recent developments were on everybody's tongue. I tried to react in a neutral way, tried to conceal the things that I wanted to hide. The reactions of the people made me think of a pack of hungry wolves.

"Finish him! Put him against the wall! Lynch him!"

I shrunk together. Was I guilty too? Would they come and arrest me soon now? Afraid and confused I ran out of the living-room and hid myself between my flowers and plants; I looked up at that little piece of sky above me. I heard the phone ring, it was Tania. I met her in 1991 when I worked in a project for the women's support group and we became close friends. She asked me how I was doing. She was concerned because I had told her parts of my story, enough for her to know that I probably relived a lot of things now. I agreed to visit her the following evening, to talk, to calm down.

The TV showed a handcuffed man walking through a furious crowd. I immediately recognized Mich! There was shouting and screaming. Surrounded by police officers he nervously walked up the steps of the palace of justice of Neufchâteau. I gasped for air, turned around and fled again. I breathed heavily and hid in a corner of the bathroom. This couldn't be, these were my people! How much time did I have left with Erwin and my children before I would have to walk through that crowd? I was shaking all over.

"Ginny?" Erwin knocked at the door.

I was startled, realizing that I was exposing myself and jumped up.

"Everything's fine," I smiled with difficulty when I opened the door, "I just wanted to freshen up a little, I'm going to see Tania."

He nodded, caressed me and looked at me thoughtfully.

"You got startled, Ginny. You know this one too, don't you?" I turned my face away.

"Do you want to talk about it?" he asked. I shook my head.

Tania opened a bottle of wine. I drank my glass half empty. My heart was pounding.

"How are you?" she asked.

I shook my head. I didn't know, I was totally mixed up, I felt persecuted, resigned, scared, confused and relieved at the same time.

"First give me another glass of wine."

I sat down on the bench as comfortably as I could. We silently ate our Chinese take out dinner, drank another glass of wine, and had some more small talk. Midnight approached

and my head felt a little dizzy. I was a little drunk but it sure felt a lot better than the chaos in my head. The subject that I had been putting off the entire evening finally surfaced. I was more talkative than usual and told her that Mich had been arrested too.

“They know everything! They will be on my doorstep any minute now asking me to come with them. Maybe they will ... arrest me.”

Tania told me I was a victim, not an offender, and that it was not sure at all that they knew everything. We didn't know in fact who “they” were: the national police (Rijkswacht), the judicial police, judges, who were “they”? But we agreed that judge Connerotte and prosecutor Bourlet were among the few white crows in the system. Hadn't Tania and I been trying to co-operate with the national police for quite some time already? All in vain. We tried to encourage victims of sexual abuse, like rape victims, to testify against their abusers. Tania had given a lot of hints concerning my abusers to the national police. In 1994 after Tony had threatened me in my own house when Erwin had gone to work, I gave her permission to provide information about the locations in the Ghent area where kids were still abused including the names of their abusers. I was afraid to go myself out of fear of my pimp, but Tania invited two officers from the BOB (Special Investigation Squad of the national police) and gave them all the information. They officers didn't even want to make a report. They told her they knew those places including the individuals and were aware of the fact something was wrong. But, they told her, with a shrug of their shoulders, that they didn't want to get their fingers burnt. The same had happened to Patsy Sörensen, a lady from Antwerp who was running a shelter for prostitutes and helped those who wanted to get out. Nobody wanted to listen. The fact that Bourlet and Connerotte had been able to find two girls who were still alive and arrest several suspects, was a miracle. They were probably the only two people in Belgium who could make a difference.

“This is your chance, Ginny,” she said, “Maybe there is a small chance now that you will be heard! You have to tell them what you know.”

I looked at her, frightened.

“Are you nuts, Tania? Turn in my abusers? If I talk, they immediately know who did it. I don't want to take such a risk!”

“But maybe they'll do something about it right now!”

I shook my head in a resolute, No.

“Ginny, listen! If you keep silent, children will remain at risk. Is it that what you want? It might be your own children! If they get away with it because you kept your mouth shut, you will never be able to forgive yourself!”

I returned home with a heart heavy as concrete. Though fearful from head to toe, hope sprang inside me. The hope that maybe there might be a small, very small chance to make the abusers in my cruel network stop. The hope that I could keep my own children out of the network.

33. Tania calls judge Connerotte

I almost sneaked into Bee's little therapy room. She looked at me in such a way that I knew she suspected something. Of course she too had watched the news and I didn't make an enthusiastic impression. I settled myself in front of her, my back bent, my head bowed and my fingers intertwined. I didn't say a word because I simply didn't know where to start. Bee said hello and asked me what I wanted to talk about. I looked at her and sighed.

"I know him. I saw Mich on TV," I could only whisper.

I shrank internally while pronouncing these words. Fear was everywhere now, in my heart, arms, belly and head. It was as if I was turning him in right here.

"What do you want to do?" Bee asked with a neutral voice.

She was such a great therapist, just the way I liked it. I had to think myself, come to conclusions, decide what to say and what to conceal. Nevertheless I sometimes wished she could give me solutions with a big s, for the complicated problems in my life. I shrugged my shoulders, a typical Ginny movement, an I-don't-have-a-clue movement.

"I'm afraid Bee."

"Of him?"

"Yes, of him ... of everything. I'm afraid they know everything. That I will be forced to tell things ..."

It almost sounded as a sob. The artificial peace of the previous year had been blown to smithereens by, yes ... my same tormenters. I didn't know whether I were still happy or not with the discovery of Sabine and Laetitia.

"You don't have to tell anybody, the choice is entirely yours, Ginny."

Bee didn't show any signs of nervousness, the tone of her voice calmed me down. Words started rolling out of my mouth. I told her almost like a robot what Mich did to me, how cruel and merciless he was. I told her about my fear of him, of Tony, of the network. I realised they would know who talked. I was indeed the last witness of my generation of victims, but I didn't tell her that. I had decided long ago, that I would take that to my grave. Bee listened. The hour flew by. Bee told me I could always call her if I couldn't handle it any longer. I thanked her. She knew me, I would only call in case of extreme need, I usually handled my problems alone. Erwin drove me home. I was silent and tense in the car, staring at the world rushing past me. I wish I were someone else, a plain, anonymous, simple woman. Why, I asked myself, did my life have to be such a punishment? Why didn't I just die in the mushroom farm with Chrissie or even before? My head was filled with whirling thoughts, memories, and images from a life that was far away and close by at the same time. Let this stop! Why couldn't I just turn off a switch inside my head?

It was late in the evening. I was lying on the sofa in the safety of Erwin's arms. He was watching TV; I was much too tense to do anything. The phone abruptly pulled me out of the cocoon I had woven for myself there in his arms. It was Tania. She started talking to me, trying to convince me with arguments why I should testify. It was important she said, because it was the only possibility to take on a network of child prostitution. Maybe this was our only chance to find people who were willing to listen to us and act. The longer I waited, she told me, the smaller the chance would become to find evidence, the abusers

were probably very busy right now destroying or concealing it. I refused at first but she sounded quite convincing and I hesitated.

“Tania, for Heaven’s sake, what if they don’t believe me? And who can I trust? There were policemen in the network. I don’t know to whom I can tell what I went through.”

After some cross-talk we settled for a compromise. I only wanted to talk to Bourlet or Connerotte and tell them parts of my story. I only agreed to tell them what I knew about Mich, nothing else. And it had to be them personally, they were the only ones I trusted ... with reservations. Tania breathed a heavy sigh. How the heck did you get to such people, how did you contact them? Make an appointment over the phone, but what was the number? I hated to call someone on the phone, I avoided new contacts, I didn’t have the nerve to go look for Connerotte. Tania agreed to take on that part. We agreed she’d let me know as soon as she had any news. I put the phone down. Erwin had heard parts of the conversation and I felt the tension. But he cuddled me quietly. “Ginny, I support you, whatever you decide to do.” I let him give me a big hug, made myself forget about this telephone conversation. I desperately wished we were back in the peaceful year before this crisis emerged.

I did the ironing, the dishes, and worked in the business. I fooled myself by thinking that my life would continue peacefully if I wished this hard enough. The phone rang. It was Tania. Fear caught me by the throat when I heard her voice. The bubble, the peaceful life, suddenly burst.

“I managed to reach Connerotte,” she laughed full of excitement.

She explained how she got the number of the palace of justice of Neufchateau from the directory assistance service, how she had repeated several times that she wanted to speak urgently to Connerotte concerning a witness, and how after several transfers she suddenly heard his voice on the other side of the line. It hadn’t been easy since Dutch was her mother tongue and she had to speak French because Neufchâteau was in the French speaking part of Belgium, but she had done it.

“I explained to him in a few words why I called. He was interested Ginny!” She sounded enthusiastic and I smiled, tired.

“But when I wanted to give him my address there were communication problems. I couldn’t translate the name of my street from Dutch into French. But, he said, it just happened that one of his Dutch-speaking co-workers was at his side and that he trusted this man entirely. He told me I could talk to him without any fear. He was a national policeman, BOB-adjutant De Baets, and because Connerotte trusted him so much I gave him my address.”

An uneasy feeling came over me. There you go, the BOB ... I already saw the face of Dani, one of my abusers in front of me. He had driven me several times to the hunts and to the factory where they made the porn movies. He was a BOB agent.

“He’s coming tomorrow.” A short silence followed. I swallowed with difficulty.

“Tomorrow?” I asked. She confirmed.

“Don’t worry; if I don’t like him I won’t say anything. Promised.”

I insisted she should be careful and not tell too much.

“Only Mich, you know that don’t you? Nothing else!”

When the phone rang the next day I immediately knew it was Tania. There were two BOB policemen in her house who could give my life a totally new direction, and I hadn't the slightest idea whether I had done the right thing or not. Trembling with fear and stress I answered the phone. I hoped that Tania would tell me that it wasn't worth the effort, but at the same time I hoped she would tell me that the two policemen really wanted to help me. I was totally confused.

"Ginny, I have adjudant De Baets and his colleague here in front of me, and they are interested in what you can tell them. I told them a few things already but it would mean a great deal to them if you would agree to see them."

Told them a few things?

"They're quite OK," Tania went on.

Total silence on my side.

"Can I let adjudant De Baets talk to you for a second? He'd like to," she asked, and I muttered "Yes", while everything inside of me yelled "No".

"Hello?" a self-confident voice. "I am Patrick De Baets."

"Hi," I answered. "What can I do for you?"

He explained that he wanted to talk to me but if I wanted to stay anonymous, this was no problem at all. No strings attached. I listened but the words didn't reach me. I tried to imagine what he looked like, to feel who he was and what his intentions were. The obligation of secrecy put a heavy weight on my shoulders. What I was doing was wrong. It was wrong to listen to that unknown man on the phone, I should obey my abusers, parents, Tony. De Baets told me he'd pick me up on Sunday morning, and asked me if this was OK. I answered yes. The train of the past rumbled in my mind, the intimidations, the punishments, the fear. Tania talked to me again for a few moments but my mind wandered off. That evening I fully realized the impact of my decision. I broke the obligation of secrecy. What would be the reprisals? Frightened I nestled up close to Erwin, but I couldn't stop the shaking. I wanted to flee, run away from this body, from this life. I wanted to die, to forget, to be faithful to my masters.

"Every time you try to talk we will hurt a child, do you understand Regina? Every time you even think of betraying our little secret, it will be your fault that someone else gets hurt."

Oh God, what was I doing? Of course I believed my torturers. I had seen things, witnessed and endured things that I would never be able to describe with words, simply because there were no words in our language to describe them. I believed them and I believed that nobody, not even the BOB guy on the phone could help or protect me. Because how could you protect someone who was mentally tortured, and had feelings of guilt because others had to suffer in her place? How could I protect these other victims? By remaining silent!

So I cancelled the appointment refusing to explain why. Why would I? Nobody would understand it anyway. Because nobody could understand how bad it was. I wrongly assumed that they knew about these networks. After all, they caught Dutroux and Nihoul. I assumed they knew a lot already, and that my testimony would not contribute a whole lot to the dismantling of the child prostitution network I was part of. I was relieved, I had taken the right decision. I tried to convince myself that I had been able to contain the damage. De Baets only talked to me over the phone, didn't know who I was and thus it

would be unlikely for him to find me. Mich would not give any names so nobody would discover my secret. That's what I thought. Until Tania reluctantly told me that she had given my 1988 manuscript, which was the basis of this book, to the BOB guys. During my years of therapy I had written down a lot indeed, partly because speaking about the abuse was too painful but also out of intense frustration because nobody wanted to understand that child prostitution did really exist in Belgium. I hoped that one day I would be able to tell to the world what went on in paedophile networks. I had given it to Tania to read, but she didn't realize that my name was in it. I looked at her in despair. Yes, she had done this. Because she had wanted to convince them of the seriousness of the issue, because she couldn't just tell things about Mich without putting them in perspective. They wanted to know how, where and when of course. And thus she had given them my draft book.

I understood on the spot that I had finally betrayed my abusers without really wanting it. I was infuriated with my friend, felt betrayed because this hadn't been my decision and I asked myself how I could have been so damn stupid to give away the control. Tania felt guilty too. Although she didn't really understand why I was that terrified, but she only knew small parts from my past. I would never have mustered the courage and found the right words to tell her, or Bee, or Erwin, who had been involved, and that children had really died there. The following days were like hell to me. I couldn't sleep or got nightmares that went on during the day. My thinking process got totally invaded by fear. I expected the national police to stand at my door any moment, to force me to explain what had happened during all these years. I made myself believe that my case had become extinguished under the statute of limitations and tried to calm down. However I had scribbled down De Baets' mobile phone number and after three days of fear and doubt I hesitatingly called him. I concluded that, given the circumstances, it would be better to go talk to him after all. Maybe I could limit the damage by telling him personally what I wanted to be said.

My fingers were shaking when I dialled his number. I could hear the ring tone. I had decided to put down the phone after the third ring and never to think about it again.

"Hello." I got startled and almost dropped the phone.

"Hello," I replied and told him reluctantly that I had changed my mind and agreed after all to talk to him and his colleague. He was happily surprised, or that's the way it sounded to me, and we set up an appointment. A few more days and I would openly commit treason. Erwin caressed me prudently when he heard about my decision that evening. He thought it was the right thing to do. All these long years together that we had remained silent, because he respected my wish to put everything to rest, hadn't driven us apart. The white nights during which he had to comfort me after my thousand and first nightmare, the depressions, and the self-mutilation, he had been there through it all. He was the only one who knew how seriously I was hurt emotionally and physically.

He knew how I sometimes used to hide in a little corner of the living room, my head in my hands, totally hunched up. How I tried to build up a life, struggling painfully, while the wounds of the past paralysed me. He thought it was time for the abusers to answer for their crimes. Just like me, he didn't seek revenge, but he wanted acknowledgement. The acknowledgement that I had been a victim of heavy, frequent and long term sexual abuse.

We both wanted to hear from the abusers what had driven them to do such revolting things. We discussed my decision for a long time, estimating the impact on our lives. We talked about the fear of reprisals, the fear of losing my parents when they would get to know that I was going to betray them.

“Ginny, what they have done to you is inexcusable, you know that don’t you?”

“But I don’t want to lose them ... I feel just as inhuman as my abusers if do that to them. I just can’t.”

I felt small and insignificant, totally isolated. Was I then the only one having to take such extremely painful decisions? Was I the only one who had lived through things like this?

34. The initial hearings

The closer the appointment came the more tense we all got at home. I reacted unfriendly and bitchy, I didn’t want anybody around me. There was chaos in my head. My life got split into little compartments again. Fear and panic had exhausted me during the past week. When the bell rang my dogs jumped up making lots of noise, wagging their tails. Erwin opened the door. He let a tall fair-haired man in, an imposing figure, self-confident but quiet and friendly. He entered the living room and we shook hands. He introduced himself as Patrick De Baets and I introduced myself as Regina. He smiled. Of course he knew my name although we’ve never met.

“Are you ready?” he asked and I nodded.

I was trapped once again. I had reached the point of no return. When I kissed my husband goodbye, I had the feeling that my life was controlled by events that I could hardly influence. But when I got in the car of the BOB officers, and shook hands with Patrick’s colleague, I realized that my choice was the right one after all. Erwin was right; time had come to call the abusers to justice. We drove to Brussels. The police buildings were large and intimidated me at once. I felt uneasy when I walked behind the policemen. The labyrinth of narrow passages and the endless rows of offices almost gave me claustrophobia. I felt trapped like a rat; even if I wanted to escape, I would get lost in these catacombs. The fact of being at the mercy of people who knew what to do reminded me of Tony but I tried to suppress this thought. I greeted De Baets’ colleagues timidly and tried to remain as invisible as possible. In his office, a narrow room filled with files, cabinets, computers and other office equipment, he explained me what would happen. In order to preserve my anonymity my name would not be made public and I would receive the code number X1. I was the first of the so-called X-witnesses. There would be about ten of them in the following months. Patrick and his colleague would interrogate me in a specially equipped room. Video cameras would record the interrogation. A third person would operate the cameras in the adjacent room.

“I’m afraid of cameras,” I whispered.

He nodded. “Tania already told me, and I know why. They made you do things in front of the camera, didn’t they?”

My stomach contracted when I nodded yes. Oh God, this was going to be so difficult.

“It’s quite different here Regina. We use the cameras to prevent us from having to write everything down and repeat every question during the interrogation. Believe me, it is very

annoying to always repeat or correct your answer, while one of us has to type it. I promise the cameras won't bother you, they are very discrete."

I would have loved to say "No" and run away, but just like I didn't resist in the past, I quietly stayed put, and underwent the events. They lead me through a labyrinth of passages, elevators and corridors, to the Serge Creuz room, which was specially equipped with cameras, built in microphones, children's toys and pastel coloured walls, to facilitate the interrogation of paedophilia victims. I looked around uneasily; I didn't feel comfortable at all in this artificial living room atmosphere. It reminded me of the past; of the rooms they brought me to, a stranger in an environment where anything could happen to you. I would not have to do the things of the past anymore, but from now on they would want me to talk about it. I didn't know what was worst and swallowed with difficulty. Talking about it seemed even more difficult, more confrontational. The toys and the little paintings at the wall, made me feel younger, smaller than I really was. I was afraid and nervous, but nevertheless I smiled and faked that I was relaxed, just like before. The déjà-vu feeling was complete. We sat down at the table and I took my shoes off. This made the well-organized cops a little uncomfortable, but I wanted to be myself and got ready to talk in my own way. I pulled up my legs and looked defiantly at Patrick. I was ready for it; at least that's what I wanted them to believe.

The discussion lasted for several hours. I drew them a rough picture of my childhood, my early years in Knokke and how I lived in Ghent during my teenage years. How I met Tony in my mother's studio, and the ensuing years of sexual abuse. In the meantime it had gotten dark outside and the building around us had become very quiet. When I stopped talking, looking at the floor, there was total silence. The BOB guys, whom I expected to know everything already, almost looked defeated. The cameras were stopped. I got up from the chair and settled on the windowsill. Everything was quiet and peaceful outside, even here in the heart of Brussels. I saw the stars high up between the apartment buildings. I felt dejected, as if by speaking about it I finally grasped the seriousness of what had happened to me during all these years. I felt depressed, ashamed, and sad. Other people knew my secret now, my rotten, dirty secret. Philippe, Patrick's colleague, who had been also at Tania's place and was my second interrogator, asked me how I felt. I shrugged my shoulders. I felt dirty. He leaned against the windowsill. He had remained very calm the entire time, an ocean of rest, and I felt at ease with him.

"You don't have to be ashamed Regina, you really don't. The adults who did this to you should be ashamed; you know that, don't you? You're not alone anymore now, Ginny, do you realize that? You don't have to carry your secret alone, we carry it with you. After this evening you will never be alone again."

I nodded. I didn't believe what Philippe said because I was overwhelmed by a chilly loneliness and a deep sadness. But years later I understood how true his words were. Since that day the weight on my shoulders became much lighter.

Everybody was ready to quit for the day. I looked at Patrick and asked him if he could do something with my story, because I wasn't convinced at all that I had really contributed to the investigation.

"Of course," he said, with his warm booming voice, "This is the beginning! Next time we can work in much more detail."

I was startled.

“Next time?” I faltered.

“Yes, what did you think, that you were off the hook already?”

I gave them a grudging laugh. The three policemen made a grin. And in spite of all my fear and misery I felt relieved. When I came home I heard Erwin snoring upstairs. I waved goodbye to the people who listened to me and quietly closed the door. I was emotionally exhausted but not physically tired. I had the feeling that I would never be able to get a wink of sleep anymore for the rest of my life. I felt drained. My fear had decreased and I realized the magnitude of the step I had just taken. I had broken the code of silence, my obligation not to talk, and I had talked to cops! I tried to imagine what my abusers’ reaction could be, but my brain refused to co-operate. Enough for now, whispered one of my alters, let it rest now. I drank a mug of hot milk and went upstairs. Erwin snored loudly; dawn was near. I crawled next to my husband, made a warm little nest under the blankets. Half asleep he put his arm around me. I listened to his breathing. I knew I would never be able to tell certain things. I was too afraid to be declared insane, not to be taken serious. When the street outside had come to life and when I heard my kids’ little footsteps in their bedrooms, I finally fell asleep, exhausted.

The first week after the hearing I felt terribly guilty. I was afraid of what was still to come, afraid to talk, but at the same time I wasn’t capable anymore of keeping my mouth shut. I knew that I would have to implicate my parents and certainly my mother during the next sessions of the interrogation. I would have liked to protect her but if I wanted to be honest about what I had been through, I couldn’t remain silent about her involvement. This was very different from the therapy sessions. I understood very well that whatever I said could have an impact on the life of others. With Bee I could unburden my soul and discuss my problems, it didn’t really matter if was entirely correct or not. Bee listened and gave me advice, but I could still lead a quiet and anonymous life. When I talked in the interrogation room, everything was recorded and God knows who could listen to my stories. I had started up a gigantic machine. What would the impact on my parents be, on my mother who had worshiped Tony and given me to him as the ultimate present, well aware that he would use me and abuse me? I was afraid to lose her but I realized that, if I kept protecting her, I would disavow my entire life and lose my credibility. Above all I wanted to remain honest, because the lies and false appearances of my parents, family members and abusers drifted further away than ever from my world.

The phone rang.

“Hello Regine.”

“Hi Mom.” I closed my eyes while a feeling of guilt filled my head. I was a traitor.

“Are you coming to visit this weekend?”

“I don’t think so Mom.”

“Why not? I haven’t seen the kids for so long, is something the matter?”

“No, but I’m really busy.”

Why did my resistance melt away when I heard her? Why was she so important to me?

“Daddy will get food on Sunday so you can stay for dinner.”

“I don’t think ... “

“And presents for the children! And don’t forget Daddy’s birthday, It’s not nice to forget that!”

Why did I always have this irritating feeling that we talked next to each other? My arguments obviously didn't count, she reeled me in like a fish on a hook. She broke my resistance by imposing her will in a compelling way. She didn't want to give me too much leeway because her influence might decrease. More than my father she realized how important it was to keep me from talking about what happened. She didn't get sick on purpose of course, but she exploited her disease to keep me chained to her. She blackmailed me every time I saw her by making me understand that she'd die if I besmirched the good reputation of the family. She knew how scared I was to hurt her. My entire life I had tried to be a good, even perfect daughter. I still felt compelled to fulfil her wishes, hoping to finally win her love. But at the same time I hated myself for living a lie. I should tell her I testified to the BOB. I was ashamed I still talked to her while I tried to unravel the truth in the interrogation room. I was carrying a new secret; I was leading a double life again. I grudgingly agreed to come for dinner on Sunday. I didn't really want to but couldn't muster up the courage to turn her down. Maybe now that she was sick and wouldn't last that long anymore, my Mommy would finally take up her responsibility and help me confirm my terrible secret. I longed for her to say that she knew what went wrong, that she made mistakes and was sorry about it.

Erwin came home and noticed immediately that I was brooding over something. He asked me what was wrong but I didn't say anything. The kids demanded my attention. I played with them, tried to read them a story with enthusiasm, got their pyjamas ready. I tried to be a good mother, but inside of me pain and sadness were storming. Why was I different? I tried to have clean clothes for my children every day; I tried to offer them a regular life, healthy food, but I had to struggle to do it. I hugged them, tried to give them physical contact and a feeling of protection, I told them stories, made time available to listen to them. First I tried to be the perfect daughter, now I tried to be the perfect mother. I had a strong feeling that I didn't succeed in either of them. My mother looked so self-assured, while I was constantly having doubts about myself. All she ever did, right or wrong, she always did "for my good". I wanted to believe so badly that it made me a better person. But I hardly slept one and a half hour per night, had the worst nightmares for many years. Nightmares that took me back every time to the ordeal of the past. I had to fight against paralysing depressions, against fear and pain, against the intense desire to die. I still needed weekly therapy to get through the next couple of days. Did her upbringing make me a better person? Did I feel protected, loved, cared for? No. Never. These two worlds, the world of my parents and my abusers, and the world of the truth and my family, were fighting for victory. Would I go on testifying or would I comply with the wishes of my abusers? Would I have the courage to break the ties with my parents and my abusers, and leave the world I grew up in? It felt like walking on a tightrope above an immense abyss.

I didn't feel very confident when I got into the car of the BOB agents who came to pick me up again. They talked about motorbikes but I didn't really pay attention. I wanted to get out of this life. I didn't want to testify at all. I wanted to forget. When we entered Brussels I got the shivers. I hated this city, I hated being dragged along, and I was terrified of speaking about what was in my head. My alters were struggling for control. But when we got out of the car it became clear that Stone was taking the lead. He was the toughest

and had the guts to walk through the doors of the police building without being terrified. He stood tall, pretended this was easy, as if he had already done this a dozen times. He did as he had been taught, year after year. Entering the factory in Zaventem had always been an ordeal. Stone forced our body towards the entrance door, step by step. Tony or the driver, a private driver of one of my cruellest abusers, walked behind me. I could have escaped easily, my physical condition was much better than theirs and they would never have caught me if I had run off. But where would I have run? I had been trained, tuned in to my abusers and their abuse. My grandmother and my mother would have pushed me right in Tony's arms again. Stone was the alter who suppressed the desire to flee and made us go inside, no matter how scared we were. Trained to overcome fear. Trained to obey, simply to survive. Walking to the interrogation room gave me the same feeling. Deep inside there was that intense fear. But nevertheless I followed them meek as a lamb, just like before when I didn't run from my abusers.

"Who was there Ginny?" Patrick asked.

I saw the abusers in front of me again, dead sharp. I was no longer the Ginny from the interrogation room, but the little child that was brought in and recorded the men and the two women who were already present. I shivered.

"How many people were present?" I saw them, counted them, but couldn't utter the words. I was afraid, afraid to use my voice and be punished.

"Six," I whispered, and shrunk together because I knew what would be the next question.

"Who were they? Did you know them?" I nodded.

I stopped talking because pronouncing their names made me feel so afraid. I can't do this, flashed through my mind. God help me, I can't.

"Ginny?"

I was afraid to look up.

"Who was there? Can you tell us?"

My throat had contracted. A long period of silence followed. The detectives waited patiently, while I was fighting a tough internal struggle. I didn't know how much time went by.

"Ginny, how long will you go on protecting these people? Help us, tell us who was present, and please describe them. Don't you want them to stop?"

I nodded, my eyes filled with tears. I didn't want to cry, I didn't! Of course I wanted to stop them, that's exactly why I tried to overcome my fear. And slowly, fighting the pain that overwhelmed me, stuttering, I pronounced the names of the abusers who made me do things I prefer to forget. I hesitated when I wanted to tell the names of the women. There was one woman I couldn't name.

"I can't remember her name," I whispered, because I was unable to talk normally. Patrick looked me right in the eyes. He understood. He knew whom I was protecting. But I stubbornly refused to tell her name. The hours went by. This was torture, not just for me, but also for the BOB detectives. They watched me struggle to answer their questions. They saw how I tried to flee into forgetfulness to stop feeling the pain. I told them little by little that my friend Clo, I didn't know her real name, might not be alive anymore. Silence followed.

"What do you mean Regina?"

“Clo isn’t alive anymore.”

“What happened to her?”

I stared outside, to the normal world that went on as usual, while time seemed to have stopped in here. I was shaking inside.

“She died ...”

My voice sounded as if I was crying but I fought to keep looking unmoved. Nobody should see my sadness, certainly not the cameras. I refused to cry and make my abusers feel victorious.

“How did she die?” Bitterness overwhelms me.

“She died after she...” I swallowed, “... had a baby.”

“Were you there?” Patrick asked, a little less roaring than usual.

I nodded. The impotence, the fear, the anger, all these feelings popped up again at full strength. I experienced a strong feeling of loss. I missed my big sister, my Clo. I felt the gaping wound that her death had caused to me. My defences broke down. By indicating that Clo had died, I couldn’t suppress her death and the circumstances surrounding it any longer.

“I was taken inside a house, some sort of bungalow.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know; it was along the old road to the coast. You have to get off and follow a narrow winding road.”

“Would you recognize it?”

“Yes.”

Again I saw the landscape slide past. It was as if everything were happening this minute, past and present seemed to merge.

“What did the house look like?”

The pain. I felt the warmth of the sun shining through the windshield. How the car stopped in front of a bungalow, took a turn and moved up the driveway. The little concrete square pond under the window next to the door, the step at the entrance, the starlings defending their territory chirping aggressively in the tall poplar close to the shed, the ditch that surrounded most of the property like a moat. Step by step I forced myself to describe the interior, the people sitting in the living room. It was much worse than the first time. At least I didn’t know then what was going to happen. How I yelled, how I didn’t want to let her go. How Tony kicked me out of the room into the corridor and insulted me. This was a terrible nightmare to me. The detectives had to pull every answer out of me. De Baets got irritated every now and then and tried to make me give more details. Nobody seemed to realize what I was going through. To relive this was terrible, to put it into words was inhuman. How could I explain what it was like to feel my sister’s life slipping away while I was holding her in my arms? How could I describe that I desperately called for help but didn’t receive any? What were the right words to describe the pain, the desolate loneliness, the bewilderment and the extreme sadness that slowly made me insane? I wanted to leave. I couldn’t go on with this. After many long hours the interrogation was stopped. Totally exhausted by all the emotions I crawled onto the windowsill. It was five AM and the blue hour, this familiar blue hour, which reminded me of the past, had come. I gazed through the window silently. I was drained, exhausted, burnt out, lonely and insignificant, terribly hurt.

Peter, the policeman who operated the cameras was leaning against the windowsill.

“What next?” I asked quietly. “What do I have to do next?”

“It’s over Ginny. They can’t hurt you anymore.”

I shook my head with bitterness. Patrick came in and listened along.

“I think they’ll get away with it,” I whispered, a feeling of total impotence and despair pervaded my body. A heavy feeling that made me lonelier than ever.

“In a short while I will go back to my family. I don’t know if I will be able to talk to them.”

The detectives didn’t say anything; they were as moved as I was. They surely hadn’t expected this.

“It’s time to make the abusers pay for the suffering they inflicted on you and Clo,” De Baets said firmly. I looked at him and wanted to believe him so badly, but somehow I felt I’d never win. The people I knew were too powerful, too influential, and too untouchable. I knew that very well, the detectives still had to find out.

35. The Spaghetti Verdict – The White March

The investigations in the Dutroux case had steadily progressed. In August 1996 the bodies of two abducted girls, Julie and Melissa, were discovered buried on one of Dutroux’ properties, and in early September the remains of two other girls, An and Eefje, were found under a concrete slab on a property owned by Bernard Weinstein, his closest associate. Unfortunately Weinstein was dead; Dutroux had killed him after a dispute. Being close to Dutroux is very hazardous to your health! Everyone expected the Neufchâteau magistrates to solve a whole series of child disappearances in the coming weeks or months. There were rumours that Dutroux had buried a whole group of murdered girls in a mineshaft in Jumet, a small village in the South of the country. The entire Belgian population was glued to their TV screens. But suddenly, in October 1996 a bombshell hit the country. The item in the news that made me sink into the earth lasted for four minutes. The anchorperson mentioned it without emotion. I didn’t hear the rest of the news anymore. The investigating magistrate, judge Connerotte would be taken off the case! Connerotte, the highly motivated judge who had arrested Dutroux, had attended a benefit evening in support of the victims. He had received a plate of spaghetti. This was totally understandable in the atmosphere of euphoria following the rescue of Sabine and Laetitia, the two girls who were found in Dutroux’ cellar. But Marc Dutroux’ defence attorney filed a complaint claiming that Connerotte had violated his impartiality. The case went up to the Belgian Supreme Court (Hof van Cassatie) that decided to take Connerotte off the case. This decision of 14 October will go into history as “The Spaghetti Verdict”. He was replaced by an inexperienced judge, Langlois. For one of the biggest cases in Belgian history this decision was absurd. It would have caused a popular uprising if some parents and family members of the victims hadn’t calmed down the people who were massed in front of the palace of justice in Brussels waiting for the verdict.

At first I felt a terrible anger, because the judge whom I so strongly believed in, had allowed himself to be compromised. I knew this was the beginning of the end. The

abusers scored their first victory. They never showed their power and influence openly but the results were clearly visible and this was only the start of the cover up operation. There would be much more to come. At this very moment I realized that the battle that I had accepted to wage was lost from the start, and that the people who took me seriously, were running a big risk.

Patrick didn't show his feelings. He remained a cop, with a steel face, his feelings locked up while on duty. He believed in the system and in the people he had known during his entire career. I tried to take over his confidence but I had seen too much to be able to do so. In spite of the many tortured and murdered children, not one of my abusers had ever been punished. None of them even had to pay a fine. If the attorney of a little handyman like Marc Dutroux already got his way by using legal tricks, what could I do against the others? What could I do, me the insignificant little victim, with my voice and memory as only proof? I wanted to quit, abandon everything, but I noticed I was not alone in my anger and impotence. The people in the street reacted with the same bitterness. They didn't want to lose Connerotte. The parents of the disappeared and murdered children, who had organised themselves in a group, openly vented their anger. Their hope hurt me. Before the case reached the Supreme Court they had still believed that Connerotte wasn't doomed and that the old judges would use their common sense and keep him on the case. Their naivety reminded me of the time I had still hope. But I had learned to be prepared for the worst. And the worst had happened. The old judges of the Supreme Court extended a helping hand to the abusers. The entire population was ignored as if they were the populaces, far below them. Connerotte was thrown out.

That evening I felt lonelier than ever before. Erwin looked at me with compassion but I turned my head away and tuned in upon myself. I was thinking of all the children who had been abused after me and the victims who were being abused maybe right this very minute. If one by one the people I trusted and who tried to verify my story disappeared, what could I still do? Would my story die without a struggle? If what Connerotte had done, were considered a violation of impartiality, if this was enough to throw him off the case, what would happen to De Baets' team? What would they be accused of? My fingers trembled when I dialled his GSM number. I decided to tell him I would stop testifying. I didn't want him to jeopardize his career for me. I didn't want to be responsible for that. Connerotte had the people supporting him. But De Baets was an unknown guy, and I was an X-witness, without a name, without a face. That evening we had a long talk that lasted for at least an hour. My voice clearly showed my despair, but he tried to convince me that he and his team would go on, no matter what happened. When I put down the phone I stayed sitting down for a long time, my back leaning against the wall. I had accepted a new hearing on Saturday. Although I had the feeling that a splinter of glass was cutting through my heart, I stubbornly decided to keep fighting.

As a result of the Spaghetti arrest and to force the political world to provide clarity in the countless abduction cases, support groups of the victims decided to organise a march, The White March, through Brussels on 20 October 1996. All participants were asked to wear white clothes and white hats. Philippe asked me if I wanted to participate. I sadly shook my head.

"I can't cope with the crowd," I whispered.

“Why not?” he asked.

It took a lot of effort to explain to him that I felt ashamed of what had happened to me. I was afraid that people would notice this by just looking at me, and that they would condemn me.

“Something evil happened to you, Ginny,” he said calmly. “You don’t have to be ashamed about that. Be proud you survived. Be proud of your courage.”

Courage? I felt so scared and so little.

“I guess it took a lot of nerve for you to come testify in front of us, isn’t it?”

I swallowed. How could he know?

“You make the difference Ginny, you really do. You make the difference for today’s little victims.”

“Are you going?” I asked in a small voice.

“Yes, I am.”

The fact that a man like him would march to support girls like me, and to demand justice and change, meant a lot more to me than I was able to explain. I watched on TV how the enormous crowd serenely moved through the streets of Brussels. Three hundred thousand people giving a one-day long cry of distress to the leaders of the country. Help us! Don’t let this happen again. I wished I were among them, and that I could lay down flowers at the stand with the many names of missing children, but I was so afraid of people. The march left an enormous impression on me. Several parents of missing children talked to the crowd. Sabine and Laetitia said a few words to thank the participants and received a deafening applause. The balloons, the white flowers and sweaters, the serene atmosphere, the silence that sounded louder than a scream, my entire heart was there, in Brussels, with the victims. And inside me grew conviction, stubbornness. I had to keep talking, testifying so nobody would ever forget. So nobody would ever be able to close his eyes to this scandal that undermined the very basic values of our civilisation.

As a result of the White March the Belgian parliament decided to establish the so-called “Dutroux Commission” chaired by Marc Verwilghen. This Commission had to investigate why so many things had gone wrong in the Dutroux case. The errors that had been made were so enormous indeed that many believed that they couldn’t have been caused only by incompetence but that there might have been deliberate acts of obstruction and protection. Why else had Marc Dutroux, a known sex offender, been released on probation after he had served only a minor part of a previous sentence? The lack of cooperation between the different police organizations and between police and magistrates had also become notorious. In 1996 Belgium had three independent police organizations: the Federal Police (Rijkswacht) depending from the Minister of the Interior, the Judicial Police depending from the Minister of Justice, and the local police depending from the local communes, headed by the mayor. One of the major decisions of the Dutroux Commission would be to merge all the police organizations into one general Federal Police. But the rather rough way the Commission would treat certain magistrates and policemen would create hard feelings and would explain the lack of cooperation Marc Verwilghen, would receive later after he became Minister of Justice in the next government.

36. The torment of testifying

The biggest problem at every hearing was to come up with concrete facts. I had a lot of problems with dates. Through the years the abusers were mainly the same people; but I had a hard time determining if a specific event had happened in 1981 or e.g. 1984. Was I eleven, fourteen or eight? And yet, if I felt safe I could vividly remember amazing details as if I were looking through the eyes of a young girl who was being taken along by her abusers. I mentioned license plates, described the interior of houses. I could tell what season of the year it was. There was a treasure of information inside my head. But sticking the right date on the right piece of information proved to be quite difficult. It may sound weird but the long years of torture and exploitation were so monotonous that I had a hard time differentiating between the individual years. Every day, week, month and year resembled the previous one ... until I met Erwin.

There were dates of course that I knew reasonably well, like the first time Tony lent me out during the 'Ghent Feasts', a milestone in my 'career' as a victim.

Sometimes we kept talking in the car when the BOB agents took me back home. Patrick urged me to be as accurate as possible. Every question they asked me could be considered as a leading question, he said. He was clearly bothered by this and I understood his worry. After all, the abusers – in the unlikely case they would ever be arrested – wouldn't have any problems hiring very experienced solicitors.

My fourth hearing was tough and lasted for hours again, but for the first time I overcame my fear. I gave them a lot of details about Clo, names, and locations. I described in detail what they did to her and how she died. I also described sexual acts that I thought I would never be able to talk about. Shame overwhelmed me, but I looked at the floor and stubbornly kept telling them what they demanded from me, what they taught me and other little victims, what they forced us to do without or, if necessary, with violence. There was bitterness in my voice, the sadness was so deep, the confrontation so painful, but my secrets emerged with the hours going by. And then they showed me a book with photographs and asked me to indicate the girls I recognized. Talking about what happened to girls I knew years ago was very difficult because I betrayed my abusers. But coming face to face with a girl or boy whom I had seen being tortured or killed was unbearable. It was as if their little face begged me:

"Why did you abandon me? Couldn't you have saved me?"

For an outsider it was just a nameless picture, but I had the impression that the picture would come to life any moment and that little arms would drag me into it. Every session with photographs was an ordeal to me. But I believed that I could really make a difference with my testimony and I tried to overcome that nauseating feeling. During my fourth hearing I recognised Clo and Vero. And again I crawled on the windowsill, exhausted, while the BOB agents put labels on the videotapes. During the ride home I started to feel better and just before I got out of the car in Ghent I mentioned to the detectives a number of names of girls who had died in the network.

During my fifth and sixth hearing I described the hunts in the Ardennes. I explained that Tony, Dani or another "guard dog" drove me to the castles, how I saw children being

killed during the perverted “games”. At that time I didn’t know where the castles were located, my abusers had told me that we went to Luxemburg. Later I would find their exact locations with the help of some good friends who had done research for me. I also explained how they made child porn and snuff movies, many times with dogs, in the factory that I would recognise a little later when Danny, one of the detectives, took me on a tour in Zaventem near Brussels. I described very accurately the inside of the building and the awful smell of the cleaning product, I guess it was Dethol, they used to clean the bloodspots. I told them that I was often driven to the factory in a BMW with tainted glass windows. When I later gave a detailed description of the interior of the car it appeared that the BMW was of a special type that was only used by an exclusive group of people.

On 13 November at 11 p.m. one of my toughest hearings started; it would last until 7 AM the next day. I had often told De Baets about my uneasiness. He always repeated the same i.e. that no journalist would get even half a word from him. And I believed him because he was so straightforward. Only a few people knew my real identity, he said. But every time he introduced me to someone else I got startled. This time prosecutor Bourlet was present and he briefly shook hands with me. He would watch an interrogation from the camera room, together with Vandoren and Duinslaeger, other magistrates, and lieutenant Michot a policeman. I didn’t say a word but became totally inhibited, because new people always threw me off balance. Patrick explained to me that this was very important to the investigation. If the magistrates could witness the interrogation, they could evaluate whether everything was done by the book and verify if no suggestive questions were asked.

The interrogation started slowly. I told them that Dutroux and Nihoul knew each other for quite some time already. Dutroux liked to play games and sometimes brought his two dogs along. They then pushed my face in a pillow of a seat and let the dogs do what they liked them to do. Dutroux was only a second class figure though, a handyman.

I explained that Dutroux’ friend Weinstein loved to bury animals alive.

And then we came to Chrissie. I had mentioned her name before I got out of the car at home on 25 October and the detectives remembered an unsolved murder at an abandoned mushroom farm near Brussels. One of them had gone to the parents of Christine Van Hees, the name of the murdered girl, to get some photos of her. When they asked me questions about Chrissie the old images came slowly back to me and made me feel awful. After some difficult moments I told them that Chrissie had been sacrificed. And then they showed me photographs. The images of the ordeal of Chrissie’s torture and murder resurfaced in my head and my alters had to come to my help.

Little Girl, one of my alters, was sitting on the windowsill, her knees pulled up, filled with pain and sadness. She had just turned fifteen, and felt the presence of the other little victims so intensely that, in her mind, she could almost touch them. She trembled and crawled against the wooden window frame. She pressed herself against it so hard as if she wanted to disappear in it. Her eyes looked at the past, at Tony who had hurt her so many times, by making her do things she wasn’t able to do. Tony was nearby too and Little Girl bowed her head because of all these painful memories. Patrick walked up to her and leaned against the windowsill.

“Which other girls do you know, *little girl*?” he asked, accidentally pronouncing her name.

“Vero, Mieke, Clo, Noelle, Chrissie ...” she said immediately, because she remembered every little face, every child.

Patrick stood baffled. After a tough interrogation, he suddenly heard his witness speak with the voice of a young girl and pronounce names that made him silent at once. It all came out so easily.

“Are they still alive?”

Little Girl shrugged her shoulders.

“Some maybe, I think. Others no.” And she looked at him with big desperate eyes.

“Who is dead?” he asked quietly.

“Chrissie,” she whispered.

Patrick asked how she died.

“They burned her.”

“Where?”

“In a cellar,” she whispered and her voice became very weak. She withdrew to herself, fighting the smell of the liquid they poured on her.

But at the next question she shook her head.

“I want to go home,” she begged, away from those awful memories. But Chrissie didn’t leave our head anymore. Her screaming, her begging for help ... Tiu. Everything flowed together again, as if time could be manipulated, and became alive when the images were called up.

My baby son whom I had cherished; Chrissie who got punished in such a cruel way; the screaming in my head; the feeling of insanity I had those days; the madness that had started when she ... but I refused to let those images through.

Everything in the interrogation room seemed filled with pain, and the teddy bears painfully reminded me of “C’est pour toi ma petite!” (This is for you my little sweetheart). Mich had given her a big present wrapped in the paper of a famous toy store. Chrissie had been in heaven. Impatient, excited and giggling like a young teenager, she had unwrapped her present. The teddy bear dressed in a nightgown with nightcap held his arms wide open, inviting her. It was so painful. It hurt so much that I could only tell who had been with Chrissie that day, in a roundabout way. It drove Patrick and Philippe almost crazy. In front of them they could see a scared, adult woman, but now they suddenly had to communicate with Kenny, the severely traumatized little alter, who had become almost autistic since the death of Tiu and Chrissie. Kenny had the information but couldn’t talk. Since that specific day so long ago, Kenny had never manifested himself again. Now, for the first time, I had to convince him to talk about what exactly happened to Chrissie. Kenny put up a struggle; he didn’t want to go back. He was scared, scared to death, scared of the people down there. Scared of the pain and of ... No! He didn’t want to say what and who scared him so much. Obstinate, full of fear, in an evasive way, he dodged the BOB agents’ questions. It was only because of the support of the other alters, who were listening and stood close by him, that Kenny released little parts of his story, stuttering like a confused little kid.

Kenny had been silent for more than ten years. He never understood what had happened to him and now, all of a sudden, he had to find words to describe what he couldn’t

understand. He was unable to tell at what time or even which year this all happened. Kenny had never learnt to read the clock nor was he aware of years or seasons. Kenny knew only the nights during which he was abused or tortured. That little alter, who only showed up when the abusers needed someone who couldn't scream or cry, was suddenly asked to reason as a normal person aware of the time of the day. 1974, 1980 or 1984 were all the same to him. Over the years he remained a deeply hurt little child; a scared abused little being. He hadn't aged a single day since his first appearance. He put together events that had happened at intervals of say, a week, a fortnight, because he hadn't actually lived during the periods in between. The alters had helped Ginny, the girl and the body, to survive the inhuman atrocities, but in an interrogation room this didn't sound very convincing. The detectives had to come up with a usable testimony, something we weren't able to provide them on demand.

Patrick felt powerless. He really wanted to have the perpetrators arrested, but he started to realize the huge resistance he faced. Connerotte was gone, judge Langlois, who had replaced him, had a much more hierarchical attitude, and only wanted to communicate with the detectives through their boss, commandant Duterme. Patrick knew very well that Duterme and Langlois didn't attach a great importance to anonymous witnesses, so imagine their attitude towards victims suffering from DIS. The mere fact that he gave me a chance to testify, knowing that it would backfire on him, is really admirable.

For people who were used to working with criminals, a victim like me must have been a nightmare. But I felt powerless too. I wished I could give them more, tell everything just like that, without fear of reprisals, I wished it were a lot easier. But I had to talk about offences that were much more serious than traffic violations and I was afraid, very much afraid. Who would watch the videos of the interrogations or read the transcripts, where might they end up and who could make improper use of them? I had to give up so much of my private life that it really scared me. Did I have anything personal left? Soon everybody would know what happened, how often. How would people who didn't know me react?

But very slowly I gave them more and more information. How they tortured her, raped us with objects and tied her up like a rabbit; how Annie let the snake she brought along slither over Chrissie's naked body; how they untied her, let her run off, caught her and tied her up again. I gave a summary description of the rooms we were in. And as if this hadn't been painful enough the detectives then stuck the photographs under my nose again. I revolted. It was five o'clock in the morning and I wanted to go home. I had to work a few hours later, take care of my kids and I knew that if I indicated the right picture, Patrick would continue for at least two or three more hours. So I did something stupid, I pointed at a photo of a totally different girl that I had never seen, photo P10. And I looked at Patrick defiantly making sure he understood that I really wanted this to stop. And he gave in. I was allowed to go home. Although I will recognize Chrissie's photo later, this indication of P10 will be one of the main reasons to discredit my testimony. Yes, I had done something stupid but what else could I do to make them understand that I really had enough of it that day?

When I came home Erwin hugged me, I let him but I was tense, my head was filled with sorrow and fear. Because what would happen if tomorrow they told me that they didn't believe me anymore and that the investigation was closed? Would the abusers walk? Would I have the courage to fight on, to testify in a courtroom with the abusers present? This scared me to death. Was I strong enough to confront my torturers?

The nightmares hardly allowed me to sleep. I tossed and turned, I roamed about the house feeling depressed and finally fell asleep, exhausted, only to wake up with a start a little later. I never screamed, Erwin continued to sleep peacefully, not aware of the ordeal I had to face every night.

"Hi Mommy!" laughed Eli my oldest son, throwing his little arms around my neck. I held him close to me, while my little girls competed for a place on my lap. My baby son crowed with excitement hearing the voices of his sisters and brother.

"Hi little kids of mine!" I smiled and my heart filled itself with love. I took them in my arms, took in their smell and warmth, and forced myself to remember how good it felt to touch them. In spite of everything, I had received a lot in this life. The bogeys of the past often took over but I was fighting for a better life. My children deserved a sweet, warm mother and a family that allowed them to grow up peacefully.

"Shall we go on a trip today?" I asked them.

They cheerfully shouted through one another asking me where we would go. I looked at Erwin and he shrugged his shoulders.

"To the sea!"

I wanted to show them how good it felt to walk on the beach when the cold wind was blowing around you. I wanted to let them experience the soothing sound of the waves rolling back and forth. I wanted to show them my secret little places in the Zwin, and on the beach. Today I wanted to run with my kids, enjoy being alive. They made a lot of noise, jumping up and down cheerfully. I tried to get their clothes and shoes together while their excited little bodies were jumping all over me. It was a cold winter's day, typical for November, but it was dry and there was some sunshine. When we arrived at the sea we all ran along the water, five dogs ahead of us, our arms up in the air. A Mommy with her three children while Daddy carried the baby on his back. He looked at us jumping wild, he was our protector. I sang with my kids, we tumbled through the cold sand but didn't feel the winter-cold. This was the place I always felt at home as a child, where I found peace. And now I could share this spot and this special day with my children. I turned towards the sea, closed my eyes and throw my head back. Three children stuck to me like glue. Erwin came to stand behind me and put his arms around my shoulders. And together we enjoyed the wind, the salty air and the solitude of the abandoned beach. There, at this unique moment, we all felt united. I hugged my children and thanked nobody in particular for this exquisite day.

37. My farewell letter to Clo

On the eighteenth of November the policemen picked me up again. My eight hearing would last from 11 p.m. until 10 AM the next day. But I felt better now and gave them a lot of information about what happened in the mushroom farm. I described the sex party that happened before Chrissie and I were led to the farm. In my mind this happened the same day but my sense of timing, which had never been very good had been totally shattered after Tiu's murder so I might have described a party that happened a few days earlier. I gave them a detailed description of the buildings and the people who were there. When I told them how they burned us with cigarettes, how they tied Chrissie up shortly before they sprinkled her with fuel and burned her I was very close to a total collapse again. This was the longest hearing I ever had.

Everybody seemed to be getting ready for a major action now. Several targets for house searches had been identified. But the operation was cancelled. Tensions had started to build up between Patrick's team and superior police officers. Patrick didn't really mind that the searches wouldn't be carried out. The longer he could keep working to get the information ready, the stronger his case would be.

I heard that Anke, my little friend from Knokke, was testifying too. This news overwhelmed me with intense joy and relief. I admired her courage! I was not allowed to contact her for the sake of the investigation but I felt very close to her now. My heart broke when I recalled that I had to leave her behind to save myself.

But by the end of November feelings of anger and deep sadness had built up inside of me. I had lost Clo, Chrissie, four little children of my own and countless children without a name. It seemed as if the major part of my life consisted of loss and saying goodbye. When would the abusers have to explain what they did to me, in the interrogation room with cold cameras pointing at them? What they did to my little sisters, while I was watching helplessly, or being forced to join them? When would the cold sweat ooze from their pores? I wanted to talk to Clo, escape from my isolation for a short while. And I wrote her a letter.

Hi Clo,

After all these years I'm close to you again. I'm so close I can almost feel you. I can hear the echo of your laughter, cheerful, open, a little cynical sometimes. I miss you terribly and for the first time I realize I will never hold you in my arms again. That never again will I hear "Hey Reggie!" while you throw your arms up in the air and hand me a bottle of beer. We weren't part of this world you and me. Together with a few other girls we lived in a world that was just beyond the field of view of the regular people. We knew it but never said it. We were sisters forever linked to each other by our common past.

I wish so much I could have saved you Clo. I would have given anything to keep you alive. And when you died, slid out of my arms like water through my fingers, I decided to forget you. Oh Clo, I couldn't live with the idea that you had given up. I was so angry with you because you dared to leave me behind in a world in which I thought I couldn't survive without you.

You taught me everything. You pulled me out of my fantasy world by shaking me and yelling “Fight Reggie, fight goddammit!” and by asking me to stay alive to see, to remember, to fight. You gave me self-confidence – “You are special Reggie, you’re going to make it, I can see it in your eyes. You will find someone who loves you, you will protect children like us.” – but I didn’t believe you.

I hated you. I was very mad at you.

How could you leave me? You were the one who always helped me get up again, who stopped me when I wanted to commit suicide. I felt so powerless, so abandoned. Can you understand Clo?

You made me believe we would be together forever, that you would always help me. But you gave up and faded away.

Time went by. I refused to face reality. To me you were still alive, had a boyfriend every now and then, but remained cheerful and independent. You had shaken off the past just like a snake shakes off her old skin. You stayed young. I didn’t want to say farewell to you. And thus I kept you alive in my mind. And when time went by it became almost real. Deep inside I knew it was a lie but the dream was stronger. And slowly my anger ebbed away and love returned.

I loved you so much, girl. My friendship for you was almost supernatural. I cherished you, loved you, talked to you in my mind.

When Tony and the others abused me, I crawled to the spot where you were. I looked at your smile and felt comforted. During all those years Clo, you had your little place in my heart and mind, the prison and refuge for girls like us. You were alive there, you weren’t dead to me.

But then I told the detectives about your death, about the house where it happened. I described the house, benumbed, and got thrown back into the past. I couldn’t cry. There was emptiness, a gaping black hole in my heart. The heavy wound that your death had created hadn’t even started to heal. And I didn’t feel anything but that wound.

But time goes by, as it always does. And even if I didn’t want it, the wound slowly heals. The intense pain decreases, despair turns into sorrow, sorrow becomes mourning, and mourning lets you say goodbye.

I touch your smile, your comforting smile, for the last time with my mind. I feel sad and tears have come to my eyes. I take your hand in mine and kiss your fingers, put them against my cheek. I try to remember how you felt so long ago. I love you so much that I do have to let you go.

Farewell Clo girl, I’ll never forget you. I see in you the common sense of my alter Oochi, the grin of Bo, the fighting spirit of Stone. You’ll be in my heart. Always.

I was learning to cope with the traumas of my childhood. To say farewell to Clo, in my own way, was a new milestone in the healing process. For the first time I allowed my emotions to come to the surface. By allowing sorrow, the “pain-alters” integrated into a larger entity. I was living on; unaware of the process that I got going by allowing the trauma that Clo’s death had caused, to come to the surface. My computer became my steady interlocutor. Everything I felt and all the feelings that came loose, I entrusted to the screen. After Bee this was my second therapy. But I still hated to speak about those

things, it remained very hard. I really did my best in the interrogation room, and I did trust the interrogators, at least the ones in front of me, but I remained frightened.

38. The murder of Carine Dellaert

Clo was dead. I had accepted it. I had recognised her pictures and given lots of details about her to the police. But I only knew a small part of the story then. I know a lot more now. Here is what happened. This is a summary of the findings of the three Belgian journalists who wrote the book “The X-files”. It’s based on the police reports.

Carine Dellaert was the daughter of Emile and Noëlla. She was born on 1 April 1966. Emile, her father had already been convicted as a sex offender and there were serious suspicions of incest. He had taken sensual photos of her. In 1982 the parents decided to separate. On 30 August 1982 Carine suddenly disappeared. She hadn’t taken clothes or official documents e.g. ID card with her but her bike had disappeared too. Emile waited until 6 September before he reported his daughter’s disappearance to the police. He left the house shortly afterwards. Around end October he came to pick up Carine’s furniture and other things. This caused a major fight with his wife who accused him of taking too much and some time later he brought back a wardrobe with clothes. Noëlla was surprised when she discovered pregnancy clothes. Nobody knew that Carine was pregnant.

All of this exactly matched with the period I stopped seeing Clo at our meeting places. She was murdered in the summer of 1983 while giving birth.

In December 1983 (this was thirteen years before my testimony!) the judicial authorities decided to interrogate the neighbourhood. No progress was made.

On 13 June 1984 Emile declared that he had visited a psychic in The Netherlands and he gave a description of a location that matched the Kuhlmankaai area in Ghent, where Carine’s body would soon be found. When the psychic was confronted with Emile’s statements he didn’t recall having ever seen him.

On 24 September 1985, during the demolition of an old building, a severely decomposed female body was found in a cesspool at Kuhlmankaai 2. The body was tied up with a white electrical cord. In the woman’s pelvis a laminaria stick was found. This stick is made from the roots of a plant, an Irish plant I have been told, and because it can absorb a lot of water, it was often used in the past to speed up births or to trigger abortions. Found also were some jewels, two razorblades and a teaspoon that appeared to be part of Emile’s utensils. The medical specialist of the court, professor Timperman wrote in his report that “The presence on the cup of the bra of a rectangular piece of fabric indicates a swelling of the breasts and a loss of fluid.” The bra size 90C, was a lot bigger than what Carine used to wear according to her mother and her sister.

Judicial Substitute Nicole De Rouck identified the body as Carine Dellaert’s. She had recognized the jewels. On 1 October 1985 Emile was arrested. His solicitor Piet Van Eeckhaut, managed to get him out on 27 December. The investigation stalled and in 1989 the file was returned to the judicial authorities as unsolved.

In October 1996 I testified about Clo's murder and the detectives remembered the unsolved murder in Ghent. The case was reopened by the team working for Prosecutor Bourlet, the so-called "Neufchateau antenna" with Patrick and his team. They received the file from Ghent and I recognized Carine's pictures. But half 1997 when my testimony and the other X-witnesses started being ridiculed and discredited, the Ghent Prosecutor Soenen, stopped the cooperation with Neufchateau.

In spite of the large number of very accurate details I had provided, the Ghent police concluded that Clo couldn't possibly have been Carine Dellaert. Even the fact that I had declared that Carine was pregnant and had recognized her in several photographs didn't seem to matter. A major element was the probable time of death. Ghent pretended that Carine died shortly after her disappearance. According to my statement she died in the summer of 1983, almost nine months later. I had seen her several times with a wealthy older man at sex parties in the months before her death. Did she go into hiding somewhere, or was she held captive? The exact determination of the time of death would almost certainly solve the case. Such a test could easily be done by an examination of her teeth. Eddy De Valck who is an internationally recognized specialist in this field, lives in Grimbergen Belgium. He has never been asked to perform the test on Carine's skull, which is kept at the court in Ghent. Although Neufchateau has asked Ghent several times to perform this test, Ghent has categorically refused to do so. Is someone trying to prevent the truth from coming out? Who is protecting whom? According to the statute of limitations the case will be finally closed next year. Is Ghent waiting for this?

What really made me angry after I found out where Clo had been dumped was that during the period after her death Tony took me regularly to the abandoned building at the Kuhlmankaai to have sex. Did he want to check if there was a risk that her body would be discovered? I was much closer to my friend than I realised. How could he do such a thing?

39. More hearings

Between nine and fifteen December I was interrogated not less than four times. Philippe, who was one of my initial interrogators, had some unfinished business that he had to take care of and he asked me if I would object if Danny replaced him. I felt very sad to see him leave but I told him I understood. Danny was nervous. He had the tendency to ask too many questions at once, which made me shut up. I tried to convince myself to be patient. Indeed it must not have been easy to interrogate a victim of lengthy and serious sexual abuse. During these four hearings I gave a lot of additional details about Chrissie, about the sex party we had in the mansion in the outskirts of Brussels a few weeks before the murder. I described the library, the garage and the impressive collection of miniature ships that I saw there. I described the people who were present, Flemish businessmen, Mich, Annie, Michael the Brussels lawyer, a guy from Mechelen who had a dog business. I talked about the riding school not far from Brussels where they had killed my son.

Just before my twelfth hearing Danny and one of his colleagues took me for a ride North of Brussels. I recognised the riding school in Meise. I was later told that Mich used to have a horse there and so did the driver of the former top government official whom I had often mentioned.

I continued to give details about Tiu's and Chrissie's murder and told them about Marie, the prostitute's daughter who told Mich about Chrissie's treason. She was murdered in Knokke at my grandmother's place a few months after Chrissie. De Baets would be thrown off the case before he would get the chance to find out if there was another unsolved murder case, and his successors ... what do you expect!

The hearings had really worn me down. It seemed as if my entire life only consisted of my past and the painful interrogations, so I asked the BOB agents for a two week Christmas break. After a few days I felt I was back among the living. I played with my kids and managed to laugh again. I read them stories for hours on end, while we were hiding under a blanket on the sofa. Only then I felt how exhausting these hearings had been, how I felt squeezed like a lemon.

The image of my parents that I had tried to keep up until now, started to get distorted. I closed my eyes and huddled up with my legs pulled up close. My parents had known everything. I had struggled so hard to be accepted and loved by them, but they didn't know the meaning of love. Neither of them had been able, not even a single time, to give me that little bit of warmth that I needed so desperately as a child. Why? Did the reason lie in their childhood? I guess so. If you haven't received love, in principle you're not able to pass it on but I sure was capable of caring for my kids in a loving and cherishing way. I had struggled to break the circle of violence and abuse. I realized that once you had reached adulthood, you had to make choices in life. You could break the circle or remain part of it. You could choose for yourself or choose for your children and for being human. A terrible childhood didn't absolve you from being responsible for what you did to your kids.

In the afternoon, when work was finished and the children had come to rest in their room, in the tented camp we had set up together, I realized that something had changed in me. For the first time I hadn't cut myself because I had bad thoughts about my parents. My grandmother, father and mother had always convinced me, that everything they did, they had done out of love for me. They had worked so hard to satisfy all my whims. But I didn't have any whims! I didn't care about material things as a child, nor did I as an adult. I never had a real children's room, I hadn't asked for a lot of toys, even as a teenager I had never asked for a weekly allowance! I had never asked for nice clothes, for a new bike, not even for the horse Tony got me. My parents had never taken me on a holiday trip, not even to the Ardennes. I had been in the Ardennes for the child hunts but the first time in my life I went there without fear, was during a school trip when I was thirteen! When I was twenty years old I was still wearing the same sneakers I wore when I was twelve. Everybody who knew me was aware of the fact that I was always dressed the same: a pair of jeans or leggings and a T-shirt. I hardly had any clothes. Except of course the ones I needed to go to 'work'. But Tony brought these along and took them back with him each time. No evidence, no traces! I lacked the most basic things, like underwear,

sandwiches for the school lunch, stockings. I never had stockings except the two pair I got from a friend at school, but nobody paid attention. Everyone talked about the horse, because it was big, because at every opportunity photographs of it were put on the table, because presents were only given when there was a big enough audience. Never did they give me a little present without other people noticing it, except when I had to give something in return. Black and blue marks, sprains, a limp now and then? I had a horse, you know. Even the visible bruises could be made to look normal by using this trick. Is it possible to fool family members that easily, just as outsiders can be fooled? Well, it's so easy to do that it's frightening.

I started feeling less depressed and sent Patrick several faxes with additional information. The third fax contained a long list of names of children I knew had been murdered, several of them during the hunts. Hereafter follows the text of this fax.

Out of respect for my own children, whom you won't find anymore but who mean so much to me:

Cheyenne, born in February 1979 and killed in the factory 2,5 years later.

Eliah, born in August 1982 and killed shortly afterwards at my grandmother's.

Tiu, born on 3 September 1983 and killed at the riding school in February 1984.

Nanook, born on 16 June 1984; died immediately after birth at my grandmother's.

Bieleke: a little boy of approximately three years old. He was the first child I saw being murdered. I was three too. He was from the province of West-Flanders but not from Knokke. Short hair; he was wearing little shorts and a jersey with stripes.

Ildiko: Hungarian girl. Abused in my grandmother's country house from the early seventies until 1976. She then suddenly disappeared. I guess she has been killed.

Katrien: girl from the coastal region. Blond braids and freckles. Was killed in 1977 or 1978 during a hunt.

Els: I don't know where she came from. She was about ten and was murdered between 1973 and 1976.

Olivier: A French-speaking foster child. The family stayed quite often at my grandmother's and he was abused there also by his foster-father. He died at the end of the seventies. I think he must have been fourteen or fifteen.

Jan: spoke the Brugge dialect. Was approximately sixteen when he was murdered during a movie in the early eighties.

Lieve: spoke the Knokke dialect; was also around sixteen when she was killed. I think I was six then.

Marie-Christine (Mieke): from Antwerp; killed in the early eighties. She was about fifteen.

Joëlle: spoke French; murdered between 1976 and 1979.

Pamela: approximately two years old, I even think she might have been Marie-Christine's baby. Murdered in 1982 or 1983.

Cathérine: murdered in 1980; spoke French and Dutch. She must have been twelve.

Sarah, Maude, Tom: killed during the hunts. I haven't a clue where they came from. But it definitely happened before 1980.

Michelle: approximately eight years old. Dutch-speaking but spoke standard Dutch, no dialect, so I don't know which region she came from.

Veerle: between 1980 and 1984; from East-Flanders but no specific Ghent dialect.

Cristel: about sixteen; in 1983 I think, during a movie. Antwerp accent.

Cathérine: French-speaking, around fourteen years of age. Between 1980 and 1984.

Véronique (Vero): French and broken Dutch; in 1979.

Luc: Antwerp accent; movie (1982?). Was thirteen or fourteen.

Paulke: French-speaking; four or five years old in early eighties. In a movie.

Valérie: bilingual, I think from the coast; early eighties.

Anja: approx. fourteen; from somewhere in East-Flanders but from a rural area.

Thamara: from the province of Antwerp; was eighteen when she committed suicide after having been raped in a terrible way. She was the daughter of a regular customer. I knew her from Knokke.

Kris: boy of about ten years old. Spoke West-Flemish dialect. They let him bleed to dead; in 1983 I think.

Sonja: from Holland. She must have been sixteen; in 1980.

Lindsey: two years. In a movie in 1983.

Anouk, Belinda, Murielle, Nicole: regular girls from Knokke. Disappeared one after the other end seventies, early eighties. Murielle and Nicole spoke French and broken Dutch. The others spoke Dutch. I think Nicole was from Ghent.

Nefryé: Turkish girl, eight years old. I guess it was 1982.

Marie-Thérèse (Marie): March or April 1984 I think. In Knokke.

Clo, Véronique and Christine.

And the following ones might still be alive.

Soetkin, Leila, Chantal, Natanja, Sammy, Nathalie, Marleen (from Oostakker).

I have figured out that I have seen approximately thirty other children disappear but I forgot their name or never knew it. It's a large number and I'm sorry I can't remember more about them. But there were certainly children among them like Cheyenne and Tiu; children who never officially existed. I helped Clo and about six other girls to deliver their baby. Victims who survived like Chantal never witnessed a murder as far as I know. And the victims who survived and did witness such things committed suicide, became drug addicts or turned insane. I thus don't have a lot of hope that there are many witnesses left who can tell what I have told you. I hope I'm wrong. I certainly know several youngsters who committed suicide or ODD.

Greetings, Ochi.

In February the hearings resumed. During my fourteenth hearing I recognized murdered girls on photos, among them Catherine and Hanim. But in the meantime the police team had reopened the old file of "the murder at the mushroom farm" and they would come to startling conclusions. So before addressing my last set of hearings with Patrick I will give an overview of what happened in the mushroom farm case. The next chapter contains a summary of the findings of the three journalists who wrote "The X-files". It clearly shows how poorly the investigation had been carried out before and after I testified.

40. The murder at the mushroom farm

Christine Van Hees was born on 6 April 1967. She was the daughter of Pierre and Antoinette, hardworking parents who owned a newspaper shop in Brussels. She had two brothers, fifteen and eighteen years old. Not long before her death, during the so-called “classes in the woods” with her school, she had a long talk with a boy called Jean-Claude J. and she complained that her parents gave her too little freedom. She had to use tricks to escape from home. From Friday 20th until Wednesday 25th January 1984 she didn’t show up at school. On Wednesday afternoon she received a medical certificate from a certain doctor Hallard that covered her absence of the previous days. Christine’s parents didn’t know that doctor and they could never explain the absence. Up to this day it remains a mystery. Before she died she mentioned a “community” in a letter to Patricia S, a friend of hers. To another friend Fabienne K. she said that she had become part of a group of older people who practiced group sex and that other young girls belonged to the group too. She said that she would definitely be killed if she talked about this to her parents or her brothers. A few days before her death she told her friend Nathalie G. that she was very scared. On 13 February her former Girl Scout leader Didier saw her around 5.20 p.m. with her friend Chantal whom she took the metro with. Chantal got off halfway, Christine normally got off at the station called Petillon. Some witnesses stated they had seen her heading home not long before 6 p.m.

On 13 February at 8.47 p.m. the fire brigade got a call from a car phone that there was a fire in an abandoned house called “La Champignonnière” i.e. the mushroom farm. They arrived at the location very quickly and discovered two fires, one in the house and another one in the cellar. And in the cellar they found a charred naked body in a heap of smouldering crates; it appeared to be the body of a young female. Her hands and feet were tied up with some sort of metal wire that also went around her neck. Her legs were bent backwards. Her left wrist was pierced with a heavy nail, eight centimetres long and three millimetres thick. Several other objects were found in the cellar and in the house.

In the evening of 14 February Pierre Van Hees reported his daughter missing. During the night of 15-16 February the judicial police informed him of the death of Christine.

Investigating magistrate Michel Eloy was put on the case. He was already in charge of the investigation into the CCC attacks, which put a heavy burden on him. In the early eighties Belgium had to cope indeed with several bombings by an extreme left terrorist group, the Cellules Communistes Combattantes or CCC, of which the leaders got eventually caught. Two chief investigators from the judicial police were appointed in the mushroom farm case, Ceuppens and Collignon. The latter one would appear to be a visitor of a sex-club called “The Dolo” that was located in the Philippe Baucqstreet. There were allegations that sometimes children were abused there.

Because Christine had mentioned a “community” in her letter to Patricia S. the investigators concentrated on a group of punks whom Christine was said to have had contacts with. On 12 and 15 September 1984 one of them, Serge Clooth, addicted to sniffing glue, and severely mentally disturbed according to a psychiatric report, told them

a fantastic story about the murder of Christine in the mushroom farm. On 3 October he said that he made everything up but in January 1985 he confessed again and came up this time with a story about a Black Mass during which Christine would have been sacrificed. But six months later, in June he retracted his statement again.

In January 1985 the investigating magistrate Eloy suffered a heart attack and resigned from active duty. On 1 October 1985 Jean-Claude Van Espen took over. He didn't seem to pay a lot of attention to the case, he never talked to the parents nor did he ever visit the mushroom farm. In June 1996, twelve years after the murder and a few months before Dutroux' arrest, he would send a letter to the parents mentioning that the murderer of their daughter "Claudine" had not been found. Serge Clooth who had been put in prison was released on 17 November 1987. He had changed his version of the facts eleven times. The European Court would convict Belgium in 1991 for holding him unreasonably long in prison without a trial.

Bizarre things happened in 1991. A. Van Asse, who owned a newspaper shop in the same area as Van Hees received threatening phone calls. His shop was burglarised and the burglars committed arson. Did his name, which resembled very much Van Hees', have something to do with this?

One day, investigator Collignon picked up Christine's younger brother from school and gave him a ride home. He told him that the investigation was leading towards important people and that it would be better not to bother them. A short time afterwards Collignon got promoted. He was replaced by a new judicial police investigator who discovered in a report dated 27 February 1984 that in October 1983 Christine had talked for a long time to the driver of a black car that had an eagle-head on its hood. He interrogated people from the neighbourhood and even seven years after the crime several people remembered the dark car with the eagle-head. The people in the car who were in their twenties, avoided contact but Christine seemed to know them. But there was no breakthrough in the investigation. The policemen stubbornly kept investigating the punk community in spite of very valuable other leads. In 1989 the mushroom farm was demolished to make room for a social housing project. And in June 1996 the parents got Van Espen's letter about "Claudine".

Two months later, in August, Dutroux' arrest shook the country. The judicial district of Neufchateau received reinforcements to investigate the witness accounts concerning murdered children. In September my hearings started with Patrick De Baets' team. During the extremely painful interrogations in November and December, which I described earlier in this book, I provided a detailed description of what I remembered about Chrissie and of the way she was murdered. I didn't know her last name at that time. The detectives were shocked by the accuracy of the details that I had given, many of which had never been published in the press. They dug up the old file of the murder at the mushroom farm.

Aimé Bille, one of them, discovered that there had been an anonymous phone call on 27 April 1987 suggesting that the policemen should have a look in the sex club The Dolo and that they would find the solution of the murder there. The judicial police had always avoided following that lead. The Dolo was a popular place and several members of the

judicial police were regular visitors according to the owner. It was the successor to another club, Les Atrébates, which had been closed down by the Brussels BOB in 1983. Michel Nihoul was a regular visitor of Les Atrébates. After its closure most of the customers, including Nihoul of course, moved to The Dolo that was opened in 1987 by the same group of people. This was the period of the sex orgies with important people in the meeting facility De Gerlache in the Brussels commune of Etterbeek and in the castle of Faulx-les-Tombes near Namur. As I said before, during these parties the regular guards of the castle were sent home and the Etterbeek police took over. They probably wanted to make sure that the important people were well protected from the curious looks of the taxpayers.

Aimé discovered that in 1983 Marleen De Cockere, a friend of Nihoul, had bought a dark brown Mitsubishi with an eagle head on the hood. According to Christian V.G. Nihoul had given him a ride in it several times.

In the period preceding her death Christine Van Hees visited the Poseidon skating rink in Sint-Lambrechts-Woluwe, a Brussels suburb, weekly. Michele Martin, who would become Marc Dutroux' wife, had met Marc at the skating ring in Vorst, not far from the Poseidon. Dutroux, who was an excellent skater, had been denied access to the skating rink of Charleroi, close to his house, because he had harassed girls. Martin declared on 4 December 1996 that Marc visited the Poseidon every week, end 1983. She wasn't allowed to come along because she was pregnant. Many former Poseidon visitors recognized Marc Dutroux during interrogations in 1997. One of them, Ariane M. stated that a short time before she was murdered, Christine had a date with a guy called Marc from the Mons area. Mons is located not far from where Marc Dutroux lived. Another witness Freddy V.D.S had told the police on 23 August 1984 that Christine was a regular visitor of café Les Bouffons, the pub where the staff of Radio Activité, a free radio owned by Nihoul, used to meet. She was sometimes accompanied by a paracommando named Marc Goossens, who has never been found. In Christine's notebook the investigators found the telephone number of Philippe Moussadek who worked at FM Inter, a free radio that closely collaborated with Radio Activité. Moussadek was interrogated on 27 September 1984 but fled Belgium afterwards.

On 15 February 1984, two days after Christine's murder, Dutroux had opened a bank account at the Crédit Professionel du Hainaut. His account was immediately credited with 35000 Belgian francs (about 850 Euro). On 17 February 100000 francs were deposited. Another account of Dutroux at the same bank received 65000 francs on 15 February.

Christine had also exchanged several letters with Pascal Lamarque, a young criminal who belonged to the group Nihoul-Bouty according to a memo of the Belgian State Security. They had indeed carried out an investigation into the dangerous cults in Belgium and Annie Bouty had been the leading figure in The Celestian Church of Christ that was part of an organisation that illegally imported Africans into Belgium. She was Nihoul's lady friend in the seventies until they broke up in 1982. But they always stayed in close contact with each other.

In March 1997 Patrick De Baets' team would be taken off the case as is explained later in this book. The new investigators would give the witnesses a hard time. Judge Van Espen resumed the lead of the investigation. On 20 March 1997 the police would search my house to find out if I kept newspaper articles or other reports that could explain how I

could know all the details I provided about the murder. I had told them indeed things that had never been released to the public and the son of the former owner of the mushroom farm had stated to the police that it would have been impossible for me to describe the premises in such great detail without having been inside. Of course nothing was found in my house. I would even give them additional information.

When Marc Verwilghen, Chairman of the Parliamentary Dutroux Commission wanted to investigate the way the mushroom farm file had been handled, he would encounter an aggressive opposition from Van Espen and prosecutor Dejemeppe. Because of the ongoing inquiry by the Parliamentary Commission, the investigation of Christine's murder was temporary put on hold, but the Commission was denied access to the files. And then journalists discovered that Van Espen had worked for Bouty as a solicitor in 1984, after the mushroom farm murder. On top of that Nihoul had stated during an interrogation on 8 October 1996 that Van Espen's sister was the godmother of his son. In January 1998 he would be replaced with judge Damien Vandermeersch.

On 29 April 1998 the Flemish newspapers De Standaard and Het Nieuwsblad would publish the twelve reasons why the Brussels judicial authorities concluded that I was not present at Christine's murder. I have listed them hereafter together with my comments.

1. The building that X1 described certainly wasn't the building in which Christine was murdered.

I described clearly that there was a house and a cellar. Christine was not murdered in the house but in the cellar as I described. As I mentioned above the son of the former owner declared that it would have been impossible for me to describe the premises in such great detail without having been inside.

2. X1 described how she was forced to introduce a knife in Christine's vagina and how Christine's body was abused with a metal object. The doctors who did the post mortem didn't find traces of this on the body that was however severely burned. An internal autopsy showed that there weren't severe wounds of the type that X1 described at the genitals.

The doctor's report also stated that the accuracy of every finding could not be guaranteed because a major part of the body was charred.

3. X1 stated that a tampon was used against the bleeding of the internal wound. The detectives found a tampon indeed but in another building of the mushroom farm. There was some blood on it but not very much.

The mother of Anne, another girl from the group, used several tampons as I stated during my hearing on 19 November. Only one seems to have been found.

4. The blood type on this tampon was Christine's however this is the most common blood type. Vandermeersch was still waiting for the results of DNA analysis.

The results of DNA analysis seemed to be inconclusive. This seemed also to have been the case with the DNA analysis in the murder case of Julie and Melissa. Strange!

5. Details of the way Christine was tied up and the material that was used have been partially published in the press. X1 could have read this.

I described how Christine was tied up first with a rope. The press never mentioned this. And a 1,80 m long rope had been found indeed at the murder site. The papers described how Christine was tied up with an electric cord, barbed wire, steel wire etc. Christine

had been tied up with an electric wire before her final execution. I had described this in a way that was much more detailed than had ever been published in the papers.

6. X1 said that a nail had been slammed through Christine's wrist. Vandermeersch had made enlargements of the photos and concluded together with experts that the nail had melted into her wrist because of the fire. The nail came from the pallets that were put over the body in order to burn it. The autopsy report didn't mention a wound of that type. *The head of the Oudergem (Brussels suburb) police Jacques Dekock, who had made the first police report, stated: "A nail is planted in the left wrist."*

Dekock would state later that during his hearing in 1998 the Brussels BOB agents showed him enlarged photos and that they tried to convince him that he hadn't looked properly the night of the murder. After carefully studying the photos he declared that he maintained his 1984 statements and that the BOB tried to make him declare something else than what he had seen with his own eyes.

7. X1 stated that Christine had led a double life the last few months before her death. No proof of this double life had been found.

There was abundant proof of a double life (see above). The negation of this is such utter nonsense that I won't make any additional comments here.

8. Christine's parents declared that X1 could not have known Christine. During a confrontation Christine's mother had totally ridiculed X1 by telling her e.g. that Christine had made a trip to Canada a few weeks before she died. This was not true because Christine had never been to Canada. X1 said that she remembered what Christine had told her about this.

Total nonsense. This is confirmed by the report of the confrontation which stated:

Mother Van Hees: "And then she made a big trip. She went to Canada. Didn't she ever mention this?"

X1: "I don't think we ever got a chance to talk about those kind of things."

That's what was said.

9. The file mentioned Marc Dutroux and Michel Nihoul. No, said Substitute Somers (who worked the file for judge Vandermeersch), The file mentioned a person named Marc from Mons, and Dutroux came from Charleroi. Dutroux mainly skated in Vorst, Christine in the Poseidon in another Brussels commune.

The statement of Dutroux' wife Martin is crystal clear (see before). Dutroux went to the Poseidon every week in that period. This was confirmed by an ex-accomplice of Dutroux, Francis H. Furthermore, during a search at Dutroux' the detectives found a table with the opening hours of the Poseidon. Many Poseidon skaters have recognized Dutroux. In spite of this Dutroux stated during an 11 June 1998 hearing that he had been at the Poseidon only once or twice and that this happened before 1980. He also stated that he didn't remember if his accounts had been credited after the murder.

10. According to the investigators Christine sometimes attended parties at Radio Activité. Maybe she met Nihoul there, maybe she didn't. Nihoul still had to be questioned about this. Dutroux and Nihoul certainly didn't know each other at that time.

The contacts Dutroux and Nihoul had before 1985 still had to be examined in detail. I don't know how serious the judicial authorities have taken this.

11. X1 was at school in Ghent until at least 4 p.m. as was indicated in the school register. She pretended she left school. She said that she was eleven years old when the murder happened. She admitted having problems with timing and dates.

Several of my former schoolmates have stated that I didn't show up in class regularly and that the pupils themselves filled in the register. I have stated before in this book that in my school, the Provincial Institute for Commerce and Languages, it was very easy to disappear. They didn't really care that much. The school received government subsidies according to the number of students they had registered. Frequent absences didn't look good so most of the time the absence was not written down.

12. Vandermeersch awaits the results of a DNA analysis of a cigarettebutt that was found at the murder site.

I don't know if results have become available.

Consequently my testimony was considered “totally unusable”. But Nihoul hadn't been questioned about his pre-1985 contacts with Dutroux yet. The investigation concentrated again on the punkers, without result of course.

41. The murder of Katrien De Cuyper

During hearings on 8 and 15 February I described how Tony picked me up and drove me to the castle in 's Gravenwezel threatening to kill my children if I didn't come with him. I was not able to give details about my role in the murder of Catherine. I felt these immense feelings of guilt and fear again and I had to stop the hearing. But I decided to send Patrick a fax with the details. In this fax I admitted that I had been forced to participate at Catherine's murder. As I said before in this book, Tony was dialling my home number on a mobile phone and told me that if the phone rang at home, his accomplice would make sure something very bad happened to my children. I expected to be arrested but because of my history of prolonged sexual abuse and the threat that my children would be killed I wasn't. I was told however that I had to file a complaint against Nihoul, Tony and businessman Y, which I did in the name of my three children who had been threatened, Eli, Yentl and Hannah. On 1 March before my last hearing with Patrick, the detectives took me to 's Gravenwezel where, after some driving around I recognized the Kattenhof castle as the place of Catherine's murder. I witnessed several other child murders there during the last series of sex parties at which I was forced to participate. During the hearing that took place immediately afterwards I gave the detectives a lot of additional details.

What the journalists who wrote the “X-files” found out concerning Catherine's murder follows hereafter.

On 17 December 1991 around 9.30 p.m. Katrien De Cuyper phoned her parents from her boyfriend's house in Antwerp. She promised to take the last bus of line 64 to come home. Around 10.45 customers of a lorry driver café “Les Routiers” saw her make a phone call there. The telephone switch was of an old model that wouldn't allow the investigators

later to identify the person she called. Katrien wouldn't be seen alive again. Her disappearance caused a big shake up in the Antwerp region because two other teenage girls Inès and Inge had disappeared without a trace during the same period. On 19 June 1992 construction workers discovered a female body during infrastructure works they did in the Antwerp docks area close to the hangers of an import company called "Katoen Natie". A dental identification revealed the body was Katrien's. The autopsy report showed that she must have been murdered shortly after her disappearance.

After the discovery of Katrien's body several anonymous letters were sent to the parents and to a magazine by a person who stated that he had given her a ride to Brasschaat, North of Antwerp around 11 p.m. I don't know if this person has ever been interrogated.

A year later a Dutch psychopath, Ludo De Beukelaer was arrested and accused of murdering the three girls. He showed almost spontaneously where he had buried Inès and Inge but denied stubbornly that he had anything to do with Katrien. The investigating magistrate Michel Jordens spent a lot of effort on the case but there were insufficient leads and five year later the case was still unsolved.

When I talked about my involvement in the murder of Catherine during my hearings in February 1997, the time of death of Katrien perfectly matched with what I said about Tony picking me up when my daughter Yentl was a little baby. I have never been good with dates but this time everything fit including the description I had given of the premises, the entrance, the moat, the little bridge, the old "orangerie" etc.

De Baets and some of his detectives would meet with their Antwerp colleagues on 13 February. The Antwerp guys reacted with enthusiasm because several details matched perfectly. They further investigated the secret life Katrien was supposedly having during the months preceding her death. Some of her friends had confirmed this but her parents reacted exactly like Christine Van Hees' parents and didn't want to accept the idea. The detectives discovered that above the café Les Routiers a Dutch porn company was established. Gerrie Ulrich, at whose apartment in Zandvoort near The Hague, the police would discover in 1998, 50.000 child porn photos, showing the cruellest ways of torture, as I mentioned earlier, was a customer of them. Among these photos there was one showing a girl who looked exactly like Katrien.

But in March the slander campaign to discredit myself, De Baets' team and the other X-witnesses had started. According to Patrick he had been told clearly on 24 April 1997 that if he didn't stop digging he would get problems.

In October 1996 Tony had been followed by the police a couple of times but only during daytime because the overtime allowances for night work appeared to put too heavy a strain on the BOB budget. End 1996 all his telephone conversations were registered and on 24 October between 4.55 and 5.17 p.m. he made eighteen phone calls to B.V.H. an officer of the national police detachment of Brasschaat, situated very close to 's Gravenwezel. Tony's ex-girlfriend Odette would later state that B.V.H. was one of Tony's best friends. And De Baets' detectives would discover that the Antwerp team had been reinforced by B.V.H.! A little later In March 1997 the Special Intervention Squad of the national police put a special tracking device commonly called "gonio" into Tony's car. This device that used satellite communications was in principle only used to locate

top criminals. When Prosecutor Bourlet asked to keep the device in the car for two more months, the national police refused to do so. During April Tony would be reported twenty-one times in the immediate neighbourhood of four schools. One of them was Katrien's school where her sister still attended classes.

But the slander campaign against the X-witnesses was starting to take its toll. Begin 1998 a search was finally ordered at the Kattenhof castle. This was too late. Renovations had been carried out and the search warrant didn't allow the detectives to search all the places involved. They wanted to request a new warrant but the press storm that had started early 1998 had discouraged them. The prevailing attitude was "Why are we wasting our time her?" In the meantime the first investigating magistrate, judge Jordens had been promoted and replaced by a new one, Vyncke.

On 21 October 1998, the Minister of Justice, Tony Van Parijs would declare that "Investigating Magistrate Vyncke had decided to close the verification of the X1 testimony based on the conclusions of a meeting between magistrates from Ghent, Antwerp and Brussels."

That was it! The murder of Katrien would remain unsolved just like so many other child murders.

42. My house gets searched

Although the hearings took a great part of my time, I refused to be dominated by the past and the slow digestion of it. I now went through a period during which my alters manifested themselves much more expressively and I knew my many selves very well now. The little ones, as I called the younger, emotionally damaged little alters, had gotten the opportunity to tell their story without the sky falling on their heads. It might sound weird but the young alters still believed that terrible things would happen to them when they broke the code of silence. The bigger alters, the tough ones, the adults, understood that telling what happened had a liberating effect. The secret wasn't such a heavy burden on them anymore. It was enriching to share our awful experiences with the detectives. Even if not a single offender got arrested, the experience this team had acquired in working with victims of heavily traumatizing facts had an immense value. My story could contribute to the recognition of the problems that the victims of paedophile networks faced. It might help establish a team of specialized investigators, who would be better able to handle these types of crimes.

Bee and I discussed the integration of the alters very often now. We weren't there yet but it didn't seem impossible anymore. I trusted my mind and my body as I had always done. After all, I did survive my personal holocaust and I had confidence in the enormous vitality that resided in me.

Patrick was alternatively stressed and motivated; he strongly believed in the justice system and the police. Sometimes I shared his enthusiasm but we had collisions too. Patrick was right when he said that I had to stop protecting my parents. If I didn't talk about what happened at my home or didn't mention that my mother drove me to those

special places, I might lose credibility. He was also right for getting angry with me when I refused to identify photos for the hundredth time. I didn't like working with photographs. I didn't like to indicate people or children; it felt too much like finger pointing. The confrontation with a face from the past was sometimes very traumatic. One day I described a tattoo of one of my abusers. The detectives showed me a book of suspects with their tattoos. I was terrified to see the face of that man again, so I turned the pages very slowly, prepared for a confrontation at any moment. I suddenly froze when I saw a particular picture. I turned around towards Patrick who stood behind me and for a moment we looked at each other in disbelief. Then we burst into a laugh. Three other BOB guys looked at us, surprised. How could they know that the man in the picture resembled Erwin so much!

One day I called Bee.

"Bee, Am I crazy?"

Was it possible that I imagined what happened in my past? I wished I could produce at least one single piece of hard evidence, a photo, a medical record or something that could corroborate what I had said. Bee and I had a long talk about my doubts. I did know what I had been through but I had only my memory and my voice as pieces of evidence. And could I really trust my memory? Bee thought I could. It wasn't my responsibility to prove that I was right. She considered the fact that I was testifying a very courageous act; the detectives had to come up with hard evidence. I didn't have the power to order house-searches or interrogate my abusers.

At home I dreamed away in my little garden asking myself what to do with my life. I was twenty-eight now and if I ever wanted a farm with sheep and chickens, I couldn't wait much longer. Erwin and I talked about it a lot. What did we want to do with our lives; stay in Belgium? I didn't feel connected to this country. There was too much narrow-mindedness, and I wanted to break with my family. I lacked the courage to tell this to their faces, but if I emigrated the problem would automatically be solved. The only thing keeping me here was my stubbornness. Erwin had started to browse through the newspapers. Who knows there was an affordable little farm somewhere out there? He knew that living in a row house would slowly drive me crazy. And looking to the future was good for me. I hadn't done anything else lately but looked into my past. After every hearing I needed about two weeks to come to terms with the flashbacks. The future seemed to be something purely theoretical. Looking for a farm gave me energy again.

On 20 March 1997 I suddenly heard the doorbell ring. I walked to the front door, opened it and to my big surprise I saw Danny, Steve and Rudy from the Brussels BOB standing in front of me. I didn't expect them and asked nicely what they were coming to do. They seemed a little tense when Danny put an official looking document under my nose, a search warrant! I let them into the living room, relieved that my little kids were at school and baby Janek was asleep. Danny made me sign something, I didn't know what because I was too bewildered to ask what I was signing. He then went to get one more agent who must have been waiting in the car. Dazed, I saw them enter my bedroom, my private territory, my safe haven. They browsed through my photo albums. Steve picked out two

albums, one with the few childhood pictures I had and the other one with the photos of Tasja my little horse. This was my only souvenir of her.

“Are you taking these?” I asked with tears in my eyes.

It looked like as if they took her out my life for the second time. This album meant more to me than money or jewellery. Yes, they took the album. I would never feel safe again in this bedroom. Once more men had penetrated my privacy without my permission and without me being able to defend myself. My feelings of safety were crushed again. They also searched my children’s bedrooms. They took the book of Helga, a friend of mine who died of cancer. She too was an incest victim and a few years before she died she wrote a marvellous book: *Medusa beheaded*. This little jewel was taken away from me too. They took my children’s toys, looked at them and put them back. Janek woke up disoriented, an hour before he normally did. An acute feeling of anger and powerlessness invaded me. Three men in my son’s bedroom, this too awakened many memories. I quickly moved past them, took him out of his little bed and held him close to my pounding heart. They then searched my living room. They messed with my papers, my poems, and my drawings. I kept Janek close to me and tried not to show how much all of this hurt. I got nauseous. This was exactly the way it used to be, when my father nosed around in my bedroom and Tony turned my stuff upside down, whenever he felt like it, to verify if I didn’t keep incriminating material or had written down something dangerous to them. This living room too would never give me the safe old feeling again. They boot up my computer. Danny made a backup of my diary.

It didn’t seem sufficient to them to know my most intimate details from the hearings, no, they wanted to turn my most intimate feelings into common property. They took a few copies of the weekly magazine *Humo* and a one-week-old newspaper containing an article about Chrissie. Erwin had given it to me but I hadn’t read it yet. I couldn’t. But it seemed disrespectful to me to throw the article containing her picture away. Not knowing what to do with it I had left it on the bookshelf. And they threw it on top of the heap of the things they were collecting. *A Life Sentence*, the book that I had written in 1989 but that I never published, was taken too. It was the copy of that manuscript, which I had given to Tania and that she had passed on to De Baets at their first meeting. I gave them my last copy because I wanted to keep the original. It looked as if they were packing my entire me. It was pathetic. My entire life seemed to fit into a small box. All these little things that had a great emotional value to me were taken away from me, wrenched from my life.

“Why?” I asked them finally.

They clearly didn’t feel comfortable about it. One of them replied that they received the order to search my house to find out if I didn’t collect articles out of which I got all the information that I provided during the hearings. I kept watching them in silence.

“The prosecutor ordered us to do so,” whispered the detective trying to make me feel a little better.

“I have nothing to hide,” I said.

I didn’t invent my suffering just before I decided to testify, neither did I lie when I said these hearings caused me a lot of pain. I had been sexually abused and not just occasionally.

“I sincerely hope that the next house search will be at one of my abusers’ house!” I yelled at them.

The days following the house search I went into a depression. I lost all motivation to go on testifying. I felt targeted; my integrity was under attack. I clearly sensed this was the beginning of the end and I said so to De Baets.

“Believe me Patrick, this isn’t supposed to be known by the public. I believe they’re organizing a cover up.”

But he stubbornly disagreed. There certainly would be actions against the abusers; his team was now at the stage at which more and more facts were being verified. Speaking with great fervour he kept convincing me to go on. He believed in the justice system, in his team, in the police. He successfully concluded many important cases, why would this case be different? He encouraged me to continue testifying and I agreed, but there was a lot of doubt in my heart.

And the house search was only the beginning. They wanted to find out now if I was a credible witness or not. In April they decided to have me examined by a group of psychiatrists and psychologists. I didn’t know them but they were highly respected people, Igodt, Adriaenssens, Vertommen, Verlinden, Verelst. Why did they appoint such important people to examine an insignificant little woman? Was it because many of my abusers were so important in business and politics? Should I have said that in fact they hadn’t raped me but that I had begged them to do so because already as I small child I couldn’t live without sex with adults? The hell with them!

And then came the IQ-tests, psychological tests, and discussions. I felt turned inside out. Was it really worth it? A year ago my life was quiet and peaceful; right now I felt as if I were being roasted on a barbecue grill. The key issue of course was my credibility. Every sentence, every memory was evaluated and weighed. I became increasingly scared of saying something I shouldn’t have said. The pressure was about to become unbearable. My feelings didn’t have any value anymore. My memories were reduced to technical study objects. Testifying about sexual abuse can severely damage your health!

There were funny moments too though. I had to look at ink spots and write down if I saw some shapes in them. It’s amazing what you can see in ink spots. It would have been much more amusing though if I would have been allowed to make the spots myself. I could certainly make much nicer ones. I’m sure that I would have been able to make an ink spot that resembled a psychiatrist. But I was afraid that their report would make me look like an ink spot.

The psychiatrists wondered why I laughed so often, they didn’t understand how a girl with a heavy past like mine was still able to laugh. They didn’t know that this was the way I had been taught. I had to laugh to deceive the outside world, to please my abusers, to protect my parents. Often I really wanted to cry but nevertheless I managed to produce a smile. Nobody had ever noticed this until one day doctor Igodt, asked me if I always laughed away my pain and sorrow. For a moment I looked at him in silence. Then I bowed my head and answered very seriously, for the first time, that indeed I always did. It was a grave moment. Then I whispered that I was totally exhausted. I could hardly put up any longer with these lengthy interrogations I let slip out. Unlike during the police hearings I now provided details on how I had coped with what happened, how I still coped with it today. How I laughed to survive, about my nightmares, about the depressions I had to fight all the time. The psychiatrists listened in a different way than

my therapist but I could sense their deep human respect. I knew that they worked for the Neufchateau justice department and that they had to judge my credibility. I couldn't predict what their judgment would be but above all I wanted to be honest with them. If they decided that I was a total nutcase, so be it, but I refused to continue acting. I didn't want to pretend I was someone else any longer. And thus I told them honestly what went on inside of me.

I was on the road for hours in a row, from this hearing to that psychological examination. I spent entire afternoons filling in test forms. It was like a school exam. The shrinks were going to judge me now; it was beyond my control. And more and more my motivation to continue faltered. And the idea of dying came up again. In the morning I got up with an increasing feeling of impotence. Erwin supported me enormously. He tried to comfort me when I withdrew into myself, full of anger.

"This is becoming too hard on you isn't it?" he asked softly when I was sitting in the chair beside him without saying a word. I just nodded. I couldn't find the words to explain to him how the yearlong battle against my abusers and my parents had drained my strength. But he offered me an important luxury. He believed me! He didn't require tests, he didn't ask for hard evidence. He watched helplessly, tried to take over as much work from me as possible, during the days following a hearing or a test. I gratefully accepted, although I didn't always like to show it to him. I often fell asleep during the day, exhausted, because my nights were like a hell. Nightmares succeeded each other at high speed. I was so terribly hurt.

43. I find the little farm of my dreams

I didn't know if it was my destiny but I discovered my farm in a newspaper that I got from my father: "Farm for sale with three thousand square meters of land, with a natural creek and kennels for dogs."

I stuck the ad under Erwin's nose. He sadly shook his head. "Too expensive," and I understood. But we decided to have a chat with the bank anyway. The broker took us to the place and let us in. I was hardly interested in the house itself, and before the broker got the chance to give us some information, I ran outside. I walked through the kennels, which looked abandoned and neglected, counted the inside kennels, ran to the meadow in the back. I had my heart in my mouth from excitement. This was it; this was what I had wanted my entire life! I was lost, infatuated, captured; it was love at first sight! Erwin and I exchanged a look of mutual understanding. If there were one thing in the world we'd both fight for, then this was it. I knew it; this was the place I would call home. My parents told me I was insane to borrow such a large amount of money. But I had found what I had been looking for my entire life: a home, a safe haven, a place to hide.

My mother looked at me. For a moment I noticed doubt in her eyes, or was I only imagining? Did she want to help me because she finally wanted to admit that she was sorry, and that she wanted to show it to me this way? Or did she agree to help me hoping that I would isolate myself on a farm and keep my mouth shut forever? But whatever her

reasons were, it was the only way to make my dream come true and thus I decided to accept some financial support from my parents, keeping it to the absolute minimum. I accepted their gift, but I realized that I was wrong hoping that my mother would express her regret this way. She whispered softly to me, while my father and Erwin were watching the news, that it might have been difficult to me in the past but that right now it had certainly been a good thing for me. I was shocked, too dazed to even undertake a faint effort to react. Was this never going to stop? The insinuations that everything was my own fault, as if I had asked for it myself goddammit! But you loved Tony! No Mommy, this wasn't an adult love. The love I felt for Tony was the desperate need for having a father! And by the way, you imposed him on me! I didn't have any choice. I had to accept him. Will you never make up for the past, Mommy?
But I took the money and I felt like a prostitute again.

By the end of May I made up my mind and asked De Baets for a two-month break. Patrick walked with me across the farm and looked around. I stood beside him and enjoyed the quiet atmosphere.

"Enjoy it, girl," he said in his friendly, heavy voice.

I nodded. Before he got into the car I yelled at him if something was going to come out of this investigation. He shrugged his shoulders, thought for a second and yelled back,

"Of course, just be patient!"

Full of hope I watched the two detectives drive away.

Moving to the farm was a very intense and busy period, but it was really good for me. I enjoyed the physical efforts I had to make in order to get all the furniture in and out of the moving van. I enjoyed redecorating my new home leaving my personal mark upon it. I put all my little statues of elves, witches and other things carefully in my glass display case. Some witches were hanging from the ceiling; others were here and there on top of the cupboards. My dreamcatchers and mandalas, American Indian bringers of good luck, went at a central spot in the living room.

We opened the kennel and the dog grooming place and the every day routine settled in. I took care of the dogs, put sun lotion on the children, fed my brand new chickens. Sometimes I walked through the meadows with my little goat Choco, a present from a good friend. The peace I experienced with the scent of summer hanging over the fields was a huge relief to me. After living one month at the farm I knew that I would never be able to return to city life again.

I tried to loosen the ties with my parents. We still talked to each other on the phone, but I seldom visited them anymore. We were slowly becoming estranged. They kept living a lie; I tried to liberate myself from it. But for the time being, I only wanted to recover from the hearings and enjoy my new life. I inhaled the smell of the uncultivated earth and stubbornly refused to use chemicals to kill weeds. I believed in natural methods and explained to Erwin why I let sheep, a pony and a goat graze the meadow, and why I cut the thistles with a scythe. I pleaded in support of the frogs hiding under the weeds, the pheasants and partridges that nested there, the plants that could grow in a natural environment like forget-me-nots and wild violets. This was my little piece of soil that I was allowed to borrow from Mother Earth. I wanted to treat this valuable land as carefully as possible. Right here I wanted to create the conditions allowing every living

creature to live in peace with all the others. I was thriving. My sister in law, who lived at the farm with us, and I, played practical jokes on each other. We sang songs aloud in the kennels. Nobody could hear or see us and we invented the craziest things. It was as if I could finally release the little child in me. In the evening I sang folksongs in the meadow, while I was enjoying the warm air of summer and the cricket concert in the background. Singing helped me heal from the wounds inflicted on me during the long years of abuse. I hayed the land and fully enjoyed my freedom. I worked very hard and intensely, but without these four walls around me I felt freer than ever. I lost weight, got a healthy colour again and my lust for life increased every day. I didn't go see Bee that often anymore but kept her informed about what happened inside of me. The integration of the alters wasn't an illusion anymore. The number of personalities was decreasing and I felt this process wasn't finished yet. If I kept progressing this way I would become a total human being again.

Fear? Yes, I was still afraid. But I accepted fear instead of pushing it into a little corner of my mind. I dared handle it and, more important, I didn't hide my feelings so much from Erwin anymore. After nine years of marriage I finally managed to talk openly about my past with him, sharing my sadness and fear. This brought us much closer together and I felt something really beautiful was growing between us. I now trusted him entirely and believed we would grow old together. He gave me the protection I needed to give my past a place in my heart, although I felt certain things would never be all right. I accepted this. I was traumatized indeed. I got panic-stricken when I got into unforeseen situations. But on the other hand I became a much warmer human being. Everyone was welcome at my farm, as long as they came in peace. I always kept too much food and was always available for someone who needed me. Animals were also welcome. I petted them, talked to them in their own language without words but with subtle body language. We understood each other. Dogs never bit me, cats didn't scratch me, and horses, goats and sheep followed me around immediately. I could put myself into their world very easily and sensed their wild nature.

44. De Baets gets thrown off the case

This peaceful situation came to an abrupt end when Erwin, a little worried, showed me a newspaper article with the following title: "Prosecutor from Liege investigates suggestive working methods: detectives under scrutiny."

Before I read the article I understood that, just when I really started to believe in a successful ending of the investigation, the abusers had scored another victory. The newspaper didn't give the names of the five top investigators who were taken away from Prosecutor Bourlet (*The Neufchateau judicial district is subordinate to Liege*), but it wasn't difficult to imagine who had been kicked out. My stomach turned upside down when I read that De Baets' team had been put on compulsory special leave and was being transferred to the financial department, because judge Van Espen questioned the 'loyalty' of the investigators and accused them of suggestive interrogation methods. Defeated I

threw the newspaper against the wall. I felt angry and powerless and understood that the possibility of catching my abusers had been destroyed.

Everything you say can be used against you, Ginny.

Tony was right! My abusers were winning again, I should have known. Why did I believe the police officers? Why didn't I keep my mouth shut? I closed myself off from the outside world, tried to keep busy working, hoping to keep the panic under control, but I shook at every move. "What have I done," flashed through my mind all the time. I allowed honest and incorruptible people to ruin their career, knowing that my abusers were much too influential.

My fingers shook when I dialled the number of Patrick's GSM that night. He answered. I wanted to tell him I was sorry, that I should have known better, but for the first time in a long row of endless years I burst into tears.

"Regina?" he asked surprised.

He knew me as the tough woman who never showed her emotions. It must have been weird to hear me cry.

I sobbed "Yes" and tried to ask him if the newspaper was right.

"It is true," he said, quieter than usual.

He didn't show it but I felt in his voice how hard he had been hit.

"Is this because of me? Does it have anything to do with me?" I asked him between sobs.

"Yes."

"I'm so sorry Patrick," I whispered.

The feeling of powerlessness reached new heights. I had the impression that again people were being punished because I dared to talk, just like in the past.

"Regina, don't. We aren't giving up, I hope you aren't, are you?"

With a little voice I said goodbye and wished him all the best.

Immediately I burst into tears, I totally lost control for several minutes. Erwin came in and hugged me softly. He didn't say a word and let me be.

I became silent and sad. What else was coming at me? Would I give up or should I go on stubbornly with a new team of BOB agents? And what was really going on? I knew as much and as little as every outsider and I followed the stories in the newspapers, worried. Articles started to appear now mentioning Patrick's name and insinuating his "partiality". I knew very well what I had said during the interrogations and exactly remembered the questions De Baets asked me. They seemed ordinary questions to me, they didn't suggest an answer, and they didn't differ from the type of questions other police officers would ask me. Who was there? Do you remember the day, the year? Do you remember details? These were questions all right, but he never gave me or suggested the answer. How would he have been able to? He only started looking into old cases after I made my statements. He hadn't ever heard of child prostitution networks before!

Near the end of 1996 I had already noticed that there were internal frictions. I didn't know at that time but would learn later that end November Commandant Duterme had been appointed as chief of the BOB team that supported Neufchateau. He immediately showed his excellent management skills by making a tour of the battlefield. He wrote memos to his superiors complaining about the individualism of some investigators and reminded the

detectives that some basic rules had to be followed i.e. that the keys of the official vehicles had to be returned after each assignment and that it was forbidden to stay overnight in the offices. This had happened once indeed because an overworked detective couldn't make it home anymore. Duterme further urged the investigators not to leave the lights on unnecessarily and to stop using so much toilet paper. He got very angry when on 7 May 1997 a detective was tasked directly by a magistrate bypassing the chain of command (*him*). Unfortunately he was on leave from 5 until 9 May.

In the beginning of 1997 he also started reading my testimony. I had testified in my own language, Dutch. Duterme was a French-speaking person with knowledge of Dutch, a requirement to become an officer, but from the comments he made on the reports it clearly appeared that he didn't understand half of what he had been reading. He accused Patrick of being much too close to me and obviously didn't like his independent attitude. So he appointed three detectives, all three of them French-speaking, to "re-read" my testimony, a very unusual process in the judicial world. On 2 July 1997 the first report from the "re-readers" was ready. It focused on my testimony about the murder at the mushroom farm and emphasized all the inaccuracies and contradictions. The impressive amount of correct details that I had given was simply not addressed. The report accused De Baets' detectives of falsifying my testimony and of suggestive questioning, leading the witness. But the re-readers re-wrote, "cleaned" my testimony thereby falsifying it in such a way that it became harmless to my abusers. It would take too long to describe everything here but I have given a few examples hereafter, with my comments of course.

The report mentioned that I was totally wrong when I said that they tied Christine up with a rope.

The charred body of Christine was tied up with an electric wire. That is entirely correct. But before we went into the cellar, Christine had been tied up with a normal rope. This rope was part of the pieces of evidence.

The report mentioned that on 8 February 1997 the detectives showed me the objects that had been found in the mushroom farm to give me a hint so I would know what to tell them during my subsequent hearings.

I had been shown these objects indeed on that day and this had been a very shocking experience to me. But what the re-readers didn't mention was that on 18 November 1996, I had already described them i.e. the rope, jerry can, etc. The detectives only gained access to the old file of the mushroom farm two weeks later.

The report mentioned that De Baets had omitted to report that I had pointed at the wrong photo, P10, during my 13 November hearing.

In a report of 6 December numbered PV 117.487 Philippe Hupez, one of the detectives stated: "X1 said that Christine's photo was among the set that was presented to her but that she had indicated the wrong photo on purpose."

As I have mentioned before, it was five o'clock in the morning, I was totally exhausted and I thought this was the only way to make Patrick stop.

In June 1998 the following text appeared in a book of René-Philippe Dawant a journalist working together with the leading TV programme in the French language “Au nom de la loi” (in the name of the law). The author presented it as the authentic text of my testimony and “proved” that I was manipulated. Who leaked this text to him and why?

D (*Detective*) : Do you smell something?

X1 : No.

D : Can you describe the smell?

X1 : If you know already what happens, why do you still want me to tell you?

D : They are burning her. Don’t you see that? Don’t you have an image of what’s happening?

X1 : (*no answer*)

And now the complete text of my original testimony. It was around five a.m.:

D : Is Kristien still lying on the table?

X1 : Uh-huh.

D : Tied-up?

X1 : Uh-huh.

D : Is Kristien still lying on her back or on her belly?

X1 : On her back.

D : On her back. Do you have to cut her throat?

X1 : (*Nods yes*)

D : And does the screaming stop?

X1 : Yes.

D : And do they do anything else? Do they hurt you?

X1 : (*Nods yes*)

D : Do they rape you?

X1 : (*Nods yes*)

D : All of them?

X1 : (*Nods yes*)

D : Is Dutroux’ wife there? Does she stay there much longer? Does Bouty stay there much longer?

X1 : I don’t know.

D : Do you smell something there?

X1 : I know very well that, uh... that... I know very well that...

D : Is there a smell?

X1 : Yes.

D : Can you describe that smell?

X1 : No.

D : Is there someone else who can describe that smell?

X1 : If you know already what happens, why do you still want me to tell you?

D : If?

X1 : If you know already what happens, why do you still want me to tell you?

D : No, no. I don't know what happened. Maybe I know what happened, but you have to help me to... Don't you want to help?

X1 : Yes I do. It was like this, like this... uh... They burned her.

D : What do they do?

X1 : They burn her.

And tears were rolling down my cheeks.

The difference between the falsified version and the real one was fundamental. In the falsified version they made the detective tell me that they burned her while I said this myself. It's easy to understand how the detectives could be accused of leading the witness after falsified parts of my testimony had been published.

On 3 June 1997, before the first report of the re-readers was available Duterme had written a memo to his superiors mentioning that De Baets was too close to me, that he manipulated me, was subjective and liked to put himself in the spotlights.

On 22 June 1997, judge Van Espen wrote a letter to the national police (Rijkswacht) complaining about the fact that De Baets had given information about a witness who pretended to have information about links between Nihoul and a former prime minister, to a magistrate who was part of the Dutroux Commission. Van Espen had always been avoiding investigation by the Commission. He further stated that he didn't need support from BOB (part of the Rijkswacht) anymore. This implied that De Baets' team wasn't allowed to investigate the mushroom farm murder any further. A copy of this letter including the first report of the re-readers would reach Ghent shortly afterwards. Prosecutor Soenen also decided to cut ties with De Baets' team, thereby ending any serious investigation into the murder of Carine Dellaert. Antwerp would follow in the beginning of 1998 after the press storm broke loose. This would mean the death of the X-files and the end of any serious investigation into paedophile networks.

An ordeal would start for De Baets and some of his colleagues. On 20 August 1997, the team would be "temporarily" removed from the investigation and on 30 September an investigation of them would start. Charges were essentially forgery and manipulation of the witness. De Baets would later be cleared of all charges but his removal killed the investigation. The Dutroux Commission would state that after the team's removal twenty times less acts of investigation had been performed in the mushroom farm case. Of course this might have been very beneficial to Duterme's budget. Spending less money on overtime could have allowed the remaining detectives to leave the office lights on a little longer and of course to procure the desperately needed additional toilet paper.

45. The new team of investigators

I was totally lost. I hesitated, waited for a police officer to contact me, but nothing happened. Nobody seemed to deem it necessary to inform me. I finally called Danny. He

hadn't received any sanction and this made me suspicious, but what else could I do? Danny seemed happily surprised to hear from me, at least that's what he made it sound like, and he told me that he was not allowed to call me. I expressed my concern and he agreed to have an informal discussion to "talk it all out". This reminded me of the past. Tony could be so sweet sometimes, but as soon as I poured out my heart, he punished me. He was an expert in all forms of intimidation. I learned over and over again that everything I told him always backfired against me. I got the same feeling with Danny.

The two BOB agents I would have to work with from now on came to get me for an "informal chat". I didn't feel comfortable but tried to stay cool anyway. To be taken along by new people again resuscitated bad memories. But I was too obstinate to show my fear. So I laughed again, seemingly unconcerned. For the thousand and first time I got the remark that I "looked really good"! What was I then supposed to look like? What did victims look like? Like gravediggers, like bent and broken creatures? Did it have to be marked on their face? What the heck did I have to do to look like a "real" victim? But I tried to be patient and answered that the move to the farm had done me a lot of good. They didn't know that the more I suffered, the less I was inclined to show it to the outside world, the result of years of training. Unfortunately, exactly this was used against me and I considered with bitterness that my abusers had turned me into a perfect victim.

The three of us sat down at a little table in a village pub. I evaluated them carefully from behind my smile and even before the conversation started I knew that I was waging a losing battle. Even if these guys believed me or at least believe that terrible things had happened to me, they would nicely do what their bosses told them to do. They weren't of the pig-headed type searching for truth and justice. They were puppets of the system. If their boss told them to look for inaccuracies, to find a way to undermine my credibility, they would do that with just as much enthusiasm as if their boss had asked them to discover the truth. They wouldn't lose their sleep over the little victims to come. The only thing of importance to them was their career. And after just twenty seconds I got confirmation of this. Eddy translated my thoughts in the following words:

"We don't care if it's true or not. The only thing that matters to me is my pay at the end of the month."

And then they told me that they had been asked to look for inaccuracies in my testimony. I smiled in resignation. Was I a clairvoyant? The discussion went as I expected. The BOB estimated that it was my turn to play. I had to come up with hard evidence. They quit doing further fieldwork. With these words they asked me to cooperate. When I told them that I didn't have the authority to do house searches, and that it didn't make sense either to provide indications to them if they didn't want to investigate them, they just laughed at me. That was really too bad for me then, that's what it boiled down to. Eddy started insinuating that it couldn't have been that bad after all. Look, I had a husband and four children. I had all I wanted and I laughed all the time. I shook my head because of so much unwillingness and explained once more that, as a victim, I had the right to a better life. I had struggled hard to be happy, I went through years of therapy, and it wasn't because I had been lucky in my present life that my past was less terrible. I realized I was wasting my time.

Behind these police officers, and Danny had known me for several months now, were their bosses and the magistrates, who didn't even bother getting to know me. If these

BOB agents were so biased against me already, how in the world could I convince the others? Come on, Eddy said quite loud, you did have fun too didn't you? You can't tell me that everything was bad? I was in love with Tony wasn't I? After exactly one year of hearings, during which I had been treated with respect, I tried to explain nicely the nature of my "love". I wasn't in love with him, I loved him like a daughter loved her father. And did I have fun? There had been some scarce moments, fortunately, I went on, because otherwise I wouldn't have been here today. But did that make the torture and the sexual abuse less serious? Sometimes my pimp had smiled at me, sometimes he had given me a warm hug ... to force me then into the bed with the man he had rented me out to. The conversation lasted for two hours and didn't lead anywhere. On the contrary, it taught me that I didn't have to hope for a lot anymore. I realized I would never be free.

I was totally discouraged after Eddy and his colleagues interrogated my friend Tania. The way they questioned her was so degrading that I started to feel nauseous when I heard about it. Her interrogation was not taped on video and they knew it. The two BOB agents abused their position to destabilize Tania, and to intimidate her by digging into her private life. They questioned her in an office where other BOB agents walked in and out and where my supposedly well-protected files lay out in the open. Tania rightly asked what her private life had to do with this case. After all, the only thing she had done was encouraging me to talk, and organizing the first contact over the phone with judge Connerotte. Her private life didn't have anything to do with this she repeated. But the detectives kept insinuating. Are you a victim too? Have you been in the network too? You're not going to tell me that you haven't had anything to do with Ginny's network? How long have you known De Baets? Was the fourth of September really the first time you talked to him? Are you sure you haven't been involved in prostitution? Really sure? They spent the entire afternoon with this kind of questioning. Tania got intimidated. She even got so scared that she came to see me in the afternoon, gave me a long and silent look, and advised me to stop testifying. It was clear in which direction the investigation was oriented. For the first time my friend fully understood the words I said to her just before she called judge Connerotte in 1996:

"This is too big Tania, I can't do anything against my abusers."

Only now she realized how right I was then. It didn't matter if I went on or not, I knew they would destroy me. This investigation was totally dishonest and not objective at all.

I didn't believe in a major conspiracy, I explained to Bee, who had listened to the latest evolutions, dazzled. But I did believe that if they took me seriously, they would have to acknowledge the existence of paedophile networks in Belgium. And this had enormous consequences. Belgium would have to adapt its laws, set up specialized cells of police investigators, arrest high ranking abusers and take care of the victims. Belgium would get one more blot on its reputation. By recognizing the existence of paedophile networks, Belgium had much more to lose than to gain, except the respect of the victims. But were they really worth the cost? Wasn't the world overpopulated already? A few children more or less certainly wouldn't make any difference. Bee nodded quietly. There was so little she could do except support me.

"What are you going to do now?" she asked a little disturbed.

I shrugged my shoulders. What could I do? A hard question with an even harder answer.

“I don’t know Bee,” I sighed, defeated.

“But can I give up and abandon the victims who can’t talk anymore? I can’t let them die a second time.”

And I remembered how I had seen the life of others slide away, how parts of me had died there. I knew that I would never be able to liberate myself from the horror that kept going on in my heart. Nobody would bring the abusers to justice. Nobody would punish them. Nobody would make them stop. I felt so little, like little David against an immense Goliath. In the Bible David won. In real life this seemed most unrealistic to me.

I still don’t understand even today why I let myself get talked into another hearing. But I did and allowed myself to be humiliated. First they asked me about Tania. I told them again how we met each other when I worked for the women’s support organisation Against Her Will, how we got along together well and how I slowly started to tell her about my past because I trusted her. No, I didn’t know her from the network; we differed too much in age. I only met Tania after I was married!

When they noticed that I reacted nervously and unwillingly to their questions about my friend, they focused on my DIS. I patiently explained to them what this meant, that this was a typical self-defence mechanism. It alone, should tell more than enough about my childhood. You don’t acquire DIS just like that, without a reason. But I was talking to the deaf. When they addressed again what we discussed during the “informal chat” in September, I got angry. There was an atmosphere of hostility and distrust in the interrogation room. A few days later I sent Danny a fax that I stopped testifying.

46. I talk to the press

I read the newspaper articles about the Dutroux case. Would Marc Verwilghen know what was really going on? Would he listen to me? One way or another I had to let him know how alarming the situation really was. I didn’t know how to reach him and I was wrestling with my many doubts and questions when all of a sudden a part of the answer reached me through the mail. I received a brown envelope, addressed to me, but the originator was unknown to me, someone from Brussels. I thought it was publicity and opened the envelope without suspicion. When I looked at the letter inside, several pages long and addressed to me personally, I gasped for breath. Two journalists Annemie Bulté and Douglas De Coninck, introduced themselves and explained that they had been following up on the Dutroux case and the X-files for quite some time already. They stated they were very uneasy about the fact that De Baets’ team had been eliminated. They doubted whether the investigations would continue and were afraid that all these files would die a silent death. They’d like to meet me, as a witness, to have at least an idea about who was hiding behind the X. They left the choice to me, I didn’t have to meet them if I didn’t want to, and they wished me the best. I read the letter, read it again and again. I got this eerie feeling that I was no longer anonymous. If two journalists could get

to know who I was this easily, who else knew my identity? And why did they ask the same questions I had been asking since September 1996?

I stared at the letter and came to a conclusion quite rapidly. What did I have to lose? I picked up the phone, nervously, and dialled the number.

“Hello, with Douglas De Coninck.”

“Hello, I am X1,” I answered.

I started laughing when it remained silent at the other side. This wasn't at all what he had expected, and he told me so. He had expected that I would be timid and serious. I sighed and shrugged my shoulders. I did not fit the image that people had of a victim. But I was a fighter and I didn't want to let a year and a half of hearings go to waste. We understood each other, this was clear. But because we were both very cautious over the phone - God knows who was listening - we agreed to meet. Douglas and Annemie would come to my place. I told them jokingly that they certainly wouldn't have too much trouble finding my place, given the fact that they already knew the address. He laughed and I hung up. I fully realized the importance of this new step. I had no idea about how this would impact my life, but I had promised De Baets not to give up and I always kept my promises.

The journalists appeared to be quiet and pleasant people. One way or another I felt immediately comfortable with them. We sat down at the table, closed the door and let our baby-sitter take care of the kids. My children didn't need to know what would be said and what was going to happen. They deserved their own life and didn't have to carry along the burden of my past. And I started an interesting conversation with Douglas and Annemie from *De Morgen* (*Belgian newspaper in the Dutch language*) and Marie-Jeanne from *Télémoustique* (*Belgian magazine in the French language*).

It quickly appeared that we shared the same worries. They had an impressive knowledge of the case and they too had been following the recent evolutions with a very uneasy feeling. My technical knowledge was much inferior to theirs, I had 'sensed' everything from the sidelines, but they had observed the power structures inside the national police and the justice department. But our conclusion was the same: this was definitely going the wrong way. What could we do about it? Why wasn't there any movement in the case anymore and why had the investigation been halted? Why the re-reading of my testimony? Why did the people from the BOB focus on the mistakes in my testimony while so many important elements were deadly accurate? Even without my testimony there were enough indications that clearly pointed in the direction of the abusers I had indicated, but there was no further investigation, why? How could we ring the alarm bell? None of us had an answer.

I wanted to send a letter to Marc Verwilghen. In February 1998, about three months from now, the Commission had to present its conclusions. It was high time to contact the Commission. I couldn't testify, because the Commission couldn't intervene in ongoing investigations, but I could still alarm Marc Verwilghen and maybe a few other members. My influence was limited; the investigation had been destroyed anyway. With a little luck someone could enter the BOB offices and look at files that were supposedly secret and anonymous. But on the back of each file there was X1 in giant letters.

The journalists gave me the address to which I could send my letter to the Commission. I decided to write them as soon as possible. I didn't know if this could make a difference for De Baets but I hoped so. Maybe nobody would accept this from me but he had done his job correctly. On the other hand, the BOB agents who humiliated me and said this had to be in my blood – how else can you let this go on for so many years – would probably never be penalized.

“If we allow this to happen,” I whispered, “Every victim after me will be outlawed and every offender protected. Every offender is watching closely what happens to the files concerning paedophile networks. Every offender watches what will happen to the victim-witnesses. This is a test case. If a network like mine survives such a crisis, it shows that from now on they can do everything they want, without ever being punished.”

Douglas, Annemie and Marie-Jeanne nodded in silence. It was very late again when I finally dared to express my worst fear. I stared at the black sky outside and swallowed my tears. I knew I had lost, even if De Morgen and Télémoustique published the story. This would mark De Baets forever, just like his colleagues who stood behind him. The abusers would walk, even Tony. The victims would be forgotten. The network would never be attacked. But what about me? The rumours that I was insane and a pathological liar were going around already. It wasn't that difficult to make people believe that a victim was insane. My judgment of time was not a hundred percent correct, I suffered from the consequences of my traumatic past, and I couldn't always remember everything correctly. And if De Baets would be found guilty of suggestive questioning, my testimony would be totally destroyed. I looked the journalists in the eyes. I told them grimly that I intended to fight, whatever the consequences might be.

“This is going to be tough,” Annemie said and I nodded. Had it ever been otherwise?

Christmas and New Year 1997-1998

I wrote my letter to Marc Verwilghen and wrestled with every word I put on paper. How could I find the correct words to indicate what had happened during the last few months? I didn't know but I tried to describe the latest developments and my feelings about them as accurately as possible. I was afraid of the press, even of De Morgen. It was my life that was at stake! I didn't want to be branded as a “victim” but even less as “pathological liar”. I hoped that my letter could make something happen so I didn't have to fight it out in the press.

In spite of everything I still had contact with my parents. I went to wish them a happy New Year but the alienation had become greater than ever. The child I used to be had grown into an adult woman who was ready to break with them. I looked at my parents' house for the last time and tried to memorize every detail. I'd never forget the loneliness I felt when I was sitting in the bath, crying, with terrible pain in all my muscles. I'd never forget that my father and my mother never cared about me, that they worked and joked with the abusers after they had just raped me, and that they never took the time to really look at me. I closed the door behind me, put the children in the car and gazed through the window on the way home. Farewell Mommy and Daddy. I tried to love you, I really did. I turned around to Erwin, who was guiding us through traffic.

“Promise you'll never leave me Winnie?” I asked him shivering, and I squeezed his free hand.

“You are the only family I have left!”

He smiled at me and caressed my head.

“I guess we’re stuck together until hell freezes over. Must be my lot!”

I smiled and put my head upon his shoulder. The kids giggled.

“Mommy is in love!” Eli shouted and he clapped his hands.

“..ovve!” Janek echoed.

End December Annemie and Douglas visited again. We drank wine and coffee and talked about our doubts again. As expected Marc Verwilghen couldn’t do a lot because I was not allowed to testify in front of the Commission. There weren’t many options left to the journalists but to start publishing. On 6 January they’d start a big series of articles about the X-files. They also wanted to publish a long interview with me. The tension turned my stomach into a rubber ball. We discussed what might happen. They were rather pessimistic themselves. It was quite possible that nobody was interested anymore in the Dutroux case and the related X-files. I nodded and replied that at least we would have tried. Nobody believed in a shockwave, but we couldn’t wait until the Commission ended their activities. If it could still make a difference, then this was the right moment. I was glad that they informed me about their plans. I promised to keep it quiet and gave them my full approval. Of course I couldn’t stop them from publishing but it was so much nicer if we all stuck together. Annemie, Douglas and Marie-Jeanne were aware of the fact that they rendered themselves very vulnerable. We were fighting against huge power structures. We were fighting institutions that didn’t like at all to be criticized. We were fighting people who didn’t want their perversions and dirty little business exposed. It could hurt or even destroy their career. Not many journalists would take such a risk. But they judged that it was their moral duty as journalists to expose dirty things that are about to be covered up. And they started to realize now the enormous suffering caused by these networks. Parents of disappeared and murdered children, victims, honest policemen thrown off the case, all of us had an impressive and unbelievable story to tell. If nobody wanted to listen anymore, then we would shout it from the rooftops!

6 January 1998

My stomach felt weird when I got up this morning. I knew that De Morgen had started the publication of their series of articles on the Neufchateau investigation and the related X-files. A number of radio messages and a short message in their newspaper had announced the articles. And now it was D-Day, the start of a new episode in the unfolding saga. I was a little worried though. Would anybody still care? And what if someone recognized me? What if my parents understood what this was all about? My little sister in law Bea bought a copy of De Morgen, which was almost sold out. She raced home on her bike and together we nervously read the first article. I sighed, shivering, and gave her a big hug. This article – the investigation of the murder of Chrissie – hit like a bombshell. It was a great example of investigative reporting. I thought with bitterness that many police officers could certainly use some of the energy spent by Annemie and Douglas in putting this series together. I read it over and over again. I sensed a strange mix of sadness, despair and hope. Chrissie girl, this is for you, I whispered in silence.

This was the day that the world really came alive for me. I had lived with these secrets for so long, not realizing how terrible they really were, until I read it in the papers. I got frightened of my own past. I could easily understand why many people couldn't or didn't want to believe it. I **knew** this existed. But the ordinary citizen would certainly have a hard time accepting that this kind of a holocaust was still going on. I also wanted to send a clear message to my abusers: I'm still there and ready to fight!

Douglas called me. We discussed the possible consequences of this article. The offices of the editor were being stormed already. We listened to each other, surprised. There still seemed to be a lot of interest in the X-files. The next morning we had to hurry to get a copy of De Morgen. People sent countless letters to the editor. Many of them expressed their admiration for the series; many offered their support. It was too good to be true. The same day, a VTM (*Belgian television station in the Dutch language*) team was standing in my living room, without ringing the bell, without being announced. Brutally as if they had been living here for a long time, they stuck a camera under my nose. Fortunately Annemie, Douglas and I had extensively discussed a possible press storm in the weeks before publication. I had the VTM journalists sign a paper that specified that I remained unrecognisable.

The phone didn't stop ringing. News reporters introduced themselves, dictated their GSM-number, and demanded an interview. I tried to brush them off as much as I could. I wanted to contribute, ring the alarm bell, I didn't want to turn Belgium upside down! That had never been my objective!

Then my mother called me. She was friendly at first but her voice quickly got a bitchy tone. Was that me, that X1?

"Mom, you know what Tony did to me. I testified against him and against what he forced me to do."

I was careful because she was ill and I was terrified she could have an attack. I didn't want her to die and certainly not that she died because of me.

"Mom, please, stay out of this. Leave the press to me. I don't want to hurt you but I can't remain silent any longer."

"What do you want me to do?" she asked.

"Mom, I'm afraid nobody will punish them."

"What did he do, Regine?"

Her tone was very unfriendly. She sounded pathetic, but alert and I was on my guard, losing my last little bit of hope.

"You know very well what I'm talking about, Mom," I said in a distant way.

Why did we have to talk now? I tried for years but she and Dad never wanted to. I told her I'd call her back at a quieter moment, that there was no time to talk right now.

47. My father's threats

The following Saturday De Morgen would publish the article about me. It was an enormous article, an entire page long. Annemie and Douglas didn't twist or misinterpret a

single word of what I had said. It was very confrontational. It hurt me and gave me relief at the same time. The secret had been broken. With a heavy heart I dialled my parents' number for the last time. I wanted to say farewell to them, in a dignified and serene manner, without fighting, yelling or words that hurt. Quietly, as calmly as possible, I explained to my mother that I didn't want any contact for a while. I wanted time for myself; time to figure out what could still exist between us. Did she want to allow me this time? She hesitated; there were long periods of silence. I had the impression we had so much to tell to each other but neither of us was able to take the first step. And thus we remained silent, both of us, two people who totally grew apart from each other, not able to express our feelings to one another. She promised to leave me alone. I thanked her. I hoped this didn't hurt her too much.

Fifteen minutes later my father barged into my living room. My in-laws were sitting on the couch while I was fixing the beds upstairs. Erwin came to me and whispered that my father was there. And again I got the feeling that I was sinking into the ground. They promised to leave me alone! Angry and afraid at the same time I came downstairs. A painful silence filled the living room. My in-laws were watching nervously. Erwin came to stand behind me and put his hands on my shoulders in a protective way.

"What the hell is this, all this nonsense in the newspaper!" my father shouted nervously. I shrank together. I almost stood to attention again. I might give a tough impression to the outside world, but when I was confronted by him I was that little girl again.

"You know best what this is all about Dad," I mumbled.

I could hit myself, I didn't sound assertive or ready to fight at all.

"I do **not** know! Is this the Tony stuff?" Again I shrunk ten centimetres.

It was totally clear to me again why I kept silent for all these years. Why I never came to him with all my problems and worries, way too big for my little shoulders. It's obvious what he had done.

"Yes, you can't imagine what he did to me," I whispered with tears coming to my eyes.

But I didn't want to cry in my father's presence. I shuddered.

"But Regine, you asked for it yourself. You couldn't wait to fall in love with Tony. You were unstoppable goddammit!"

His hands trembled with suppressed anger. I trembled with fear. Tears rolled down my cheeks. Where were you Dad? What have you done? You did do things, didn't you? Or was I not allowed to talk about it? You didn't mind at all that your daughter was a whore.

"I did not ask for it myself. He abused me sexually! He mishandled me, can you understand?"

"Why haven't you said anything?"

But Dad, you were watching, what the hell could I add?

"I tried Dad ..."

"Oh yes? When?"

I started giving examples. Erwin helped me. Because he was there when we tried to talk about my past. But my father denied with the grim stubbornness of people who knew they were guilty. I started crying. My heart broke for having to fight him. Why didn't he comfort me? Wasn't that what fathers did? Or not, I didn't know, I never had the privilege to have a real father. But Erwin... he would protect his daughters as a lion. He would never allow these terrible things to happen to his children!

“If anything happens to your mother – and listen to me very good – then I’ll hold you responsible, do you understand! I have the means! I will break you!”

I looked at him in disbelief. My in laws were shocked too. My father was a man who always looked nice and friendly. That was his act, and he seldom failed to play it well, except at moments like this one.

“Ginny had stretch marks when she was just sixteen, I saw them myself!” answered my mother in law firmly.

“You saw these, or didn’t you? You can’t deny things have happened?”

And the shouting and name calling started. I asked everybody to stop this, crying. And in an almost superhuman effort, I asked my father to leave. My children were watching surprised. They were the main victims now, I told my father.

“Go away, I want to keep my children out of this!” I said.

“I have the means!” he threatened again, and I stayed behind, small and insignificant. This confirmed it to me. I was never able to talk, because they always shut me up. For the first time after thirteen years of marriage, Erwin saw how my father really was. My mother in law looked at me flabbergasted. For thirteen years she had seen my parents as nice people who had spoiled me rotten. Now, for the first time, she too saw how life with my parents really was, behind these closed doors. And it suddenly dawned upon her that I was more right than she had thought all these years. She felt guilty, when I started sobbing as soon as the door closed behind my father. Erwin hugged me and I held on tight. Oh God, why did all of this have to happen? Erwin calmed me down, while the grandparents took care of the kids.

“You are strong Ginny. You’ll be all right. We can handle this together,” he assured me. For the first time after so long I hugged him without being tense.

“I don’t want to lose you, Winnie. I’m so terrified of losing you too,” I sobbed.

Erwin shook his head. He promised eternal faithfulness, with the same honesty as he had done on our wedding day.

It had finally happened; the ties with my parents had been cut. I made one last attempt to communicate and let their grandchildren call them. This would be used against me later. My father used this phone call, which was meant to give the kids the opportunity to say goodbye to their grandparents in a nice way, to prove that I was totally insane and that I had created a storm in a teacup. I had asked them to avoid the press, but just like I had asked them in the past to take me home, away from Knokke, and to liberate me from Tony’s claws, this was a useless question. My parents came on the TV news, they could not be recognized but my picture and my son Janek’s were clearly visible. They stated that I was insane.

“She’s crazy sir! They’re going to put her away!”

It was so silly. I supposedly became insane because I had read too many Stephen King novels. A little later I heard the story of Leo Stoops, a VRT (*Belgian television station in the Dutch language*) journalist, arriving in Neufchateau with his backseat full of Stephen King novels. When the other journalists asked him what his intentions were he answered: “I will expose X1! I’ll prove that she got her ideas from these books!”

These little anecdotes were important to me. It put what happened to me in perspective. It was not me who lost it, became hysterical or obsessed, but the people whose view of

society had been turned totally upside down. This was very hard for them to cope with, because it hurt. They imagined they were living in a safe, controlled society, but all of a sudden their illusions were taken away from them, destroyed. And I was the one who had caused their nightmare.

48. On TV

Shortly afterwards Paul Bottelberghs, a journalist of VRT (*Belgian TV station in the Dutch language*), dropped by and asks me if I would agree to tell my story on TV as part of his programme Panorama. It would be in a casual, quiet and serene way without special effects or sensation, just like I was talking to him right now. The interview would be shown to the public on Thursday 22 January 1998. I looked at him for quite a while, realizing that, if I agreed, I would entirely give up my anonymity, there wouldn't be a way back. I looked out the window, at the meadows around the farm, considering that I might ruin my business. If I agreed to come out in the open with my real name, without any disguise, I might lose my customers. I might also lose my farm, our home. I swallowed painfully and took the little bloodstone bear, my Navajo talisman that was hanging from my necklace, between my fingers. I believed in its power of helping me make the right choice. This was such a difficult decision. A long period of silence followed, just like when I had to describe very painful experiences during the hearings.

"I'll do it," I nodded finally.

I believed I had made the right decision. If I agreed to choose for the victims, I might eventually win, even if I lost my farm.

I hated cameras and the hearings surely hadn't changed my feelings about them. They reminded me of the past when I almost died of shame being filmed and they wouldn't stop until the abusers had seen enough. At these moments not the men but the cameras were my monsters. They registered how my privacy was being so terribly violated. They frightened me terribly as a little girl because I was convinced that one day the police would find the films and take me away from my Mommy and Daddy.

"If anyone ever finds out what you do in front of our cameras, they will put you in a children's institution for a very long time, remember, whore! They will immediately notice that you love to do this!" they had told me repeatedly.

The Panorama crew came to my home and started setting everything up for the TV interview, which would be shot at my farm, my safe haven. I didn't know if Paul Bottelberghs realised how important all of this was to me, but by instinct he did all the right things to make me feel relaxed. He explained every detail of what would happen. I learned that the old fears were dead fears. I didn't have to take my clothes off; my intimacy would not be violated. Whatever happened in front of the cameras, I could control it. I was allowed to decide myself what I would say and do. I could decide to break when it became too much to me. It was a painful but healing confrontation. The old times were really gone. I was capable now of looking the monster right in the eyes and defeating it. The crew around me gave me a lot of support. It gave me a strange happy

feeling. I smiled when I realised that I was using the cameras now to unveil my secret. The roles had been inverted. That night I dreamed about the movies the abusers made. How I was forced in a subtle way to do things.

I went to see Bee and told her that reliving my past hurt so much. The articles in *De Morgen* had caused a lot of upheaval but this appeared to be good for me. It had allowed me to break down the walls in my mind that protected me against the terrible memories of my abuse. Now that my secret was being unveiled, now that I had been victorious in my confrontation with the cameras, the walls were coming down. My defence mechanism seemed to be no longer required. I could survive without other personalities; I was strong enough now to stand on my own feet. I still felt anger, fear, pain, sadness and hatred, but the emotions that had been locked up behind the walls of my alter egos during all these years were now flowing through one another. It was an avalanche of feelings that destabilised me but on the other hand made me feel very much alive again, finally.

"I feel all of this in an adult way now. Not chaotic like in the past, but structured and..." I hesitated, "Integrated." Bee looked at me for a long time.

"I can't believe this," she faltered.

"Don't I have DIS any longer now?" I asked a little sheepish.

Bee thought it wouldn't take long anymore before I was a complete human being again. I sighed and told her I was not convinced that everything would be sold now. My past would keep affecting me anyway. Some painful memories had been awakened, like Chrissie's death, my little children who died. I'd have to learn how to live with this one way or another.

"That's right," Bee confirmed,

"But slowly you will notice that they will get their place in your life. You will see that the time between two difficult periods will increase. I know you're going to make it."

I nodded and we then discussed what was going to happen in the near future.

RTL, a Belgian TV station in the French language was very eager to get me on TV too. But I had made an agreement with VRT that they would be the first to show my face to the public. We found a solution acceptable to all by allowing RTL to interview me with my face unrecognisable a few days before *Panorama* would show my real face. I came on TV in the RTL programme *Controverse*. As always I looked very calm but my hands were soaked with sweat. But as soon as the cameras started running I became a girl who knew what to do. The fear and nervousness disappeared, I paid attention to the signals the operators gave me and obediently did what they wanted. I was still an anonymous woman but the room full of cables and the men giving indications through their mikes almost threw me back into the past. I kept smiling, alert and obedient, just like I had been taught. When it was all over and I felt the cool outside air I got the shivers. An RTL employee drove me back home and we had a nice chat. He was such a sweet guy; I felt this right away. A big friendly chap who talked about the animals he cared for when his neighbours went away on a trip, about his little garden which he spent his free time in, about his kids. I listened and realized it was 1998. I wasn't driven home by an offender or a driver who couldn't keep his hands off me. I was not returning to people who knowingly pretended they didn't know where I had been driven. This was 1998, and look Ginny, how different

everything was, I made myself think, a nice guy behind the wheel, a beautiful day in spite of the rain, and nobody who caused me any pain. I smiled at this anonymous guy, whom I probably wouldn't ever meet again after today, but who meant a lot to me. He didn't realize that he helped me learn that some people were trustworthy, that some people simply were good human beings.

The BOB still talked to me; they didn't have much of a choice now that the press was on their backs. The magistrates too seemed to have suddenly remembered that I existed. It had even become possible to meet them. Judge Vandermeersch wanted to see me on Wednesday, the day before the Panorama interview would come on TV. He was friendly and attentive but could I trust him? I wouldn't bet a penny on it. I had lost my faith in the justice system and I didn't trust the police anymore either. Eddy, the BOB agent who had made the rudest comments so far, like calling my torturers my "lovers", "fuckers" and "screwers", had become more careful now, but he remained vicious. Danny was friendlier and tried to protect me from the press, but even him I didn't trust anymore. No one, not even Vandermeersch, provided me with any explanation why De Baets was being criticized so heavily, so I answered the questions but remained distant, even a little hostile. I was fed up playing their hypocritical little game, but yet... suppose they would go after Tony... or Mich. I had to keep testifying because I was terrified that I would destroy this elusive little chance that my rapists might ever be brought to court. When I left the catacombs of the justice building – it was so weird that all those magistrates and cops seemed to be buried alive in tight, choking little spaces that looked a lot like prison cells – I had to survive a massive attack by press photographers. They knew that Panorama was supposed to be the first to show my face to the public the next day, and they wanted to shoot the first picture to beat Panorama. We drove off leaving the photographers behind us. Eddy mentioned that this was what I had chosen. My eyes spat fire when I looked at that self-righteous little asshole behind the wheel.

"No Eddy, this is not what I have chosen. The investigation was stopped, what else was I supposed to do?"

Before he started shouting Danny stopped him. He knew very well that the Rijkswacht (*National Police*) didn't come out of all of this very nicely and he didn't want to blow the image of his organization to smithereens entirely.

Paul had shown me the programme before it went on the air, but when I was sitting on the sofa on Thursday evening with my sister and brother-in-law besides me, I was nervous. We had put chips on the table as if we were going to watch a video. But my throat contracted from the pent-up tension. I forced myself to stay seated but I had a really hard time. The sound of the jingle went right to the bone and startled me. But this was it; no one could stop it now. And suddenly I got carried away on an enormous wave of relief. Now that I saw the programme on TV, knowing that a lot of people were watching, I knew that I was partly liberated. My secret wasn't a secret any longer; never again would it be one.

When it was finished I hugged Erwin and Bea. I swallowed in order to keep my tears under control. I had done it! Oh God, I had had the nerve to do it! From now on I wasn't just a victim anymore, I was a victim that fought back! I started dancing; I hopped and

jumped in the garden. Not because I believed I was holding the whole world in my hand, not because my face had been on TV, but simply because I had managed to kick my abusers' butt.

"Look at me Tony, and guzzle down your glass of good wine, I hope you choke on it! I'm free!"

Erwin looked at me a little apprehensive.

"Ginny," he said with some hesitation,

"If someone sees you hopping around here, they'll certainly believe you're a loony!"

I laughed cheerfully. I knew, I knew! But please let me enjoy this at least once. Tomorrow they'd try to break me down again. Tomorrow they'd do everything to make my testimony look ridiculous. Let me enjoy for once, this major – that's what it was to me – victory.

The next day all hell broke loose. It seemed as if the entire press wanted to take my farm by storm. Even The Netherlands seemed interested. I felt overwhelmed but fortunately we owned thirteen thousand square meters of land, all fenced off. This allowed the children to play in all peace and quiet. Off course they noticed something was going on but they were carefully protected from this horde of sensation-mongers. And I refused to take advantage of the innocent faces of my children to arouse sympathy. I wanted to fight my war in an honest and fair way. I therefore never openly name the abusers and I avoided sensation. I remained rather distant, which wasn't appreciated by certain newspapers.

I called my friends in the evening trying not to isolate myself. Surprisingly this worked fairly well, even though I felt bad about the rupture with my parents. They had watched Panorama in the company of a journalist of *Het Volk* (*Belgian newspaper in the Dutch language*). They hadn't shown anything but disapproval, exactly as I had expected. I discussed this with Erwin, Bee, and with my friends. They approved of what I had done or at least understood my feelings. Unlike in the past I did now share my pain and doubts with other people. This was like a revelation to me. My life had changed so fundamentally.

Because the ties with my parents and the rest of my family were ruptured, I didn't have the feeling anymore of having to live up to certain expectations that they had imposed on me like being obedient, defending the family honour, keeping my mouth shut. I didn't have to be perfect anymore, nor did I have to act. I knew that from now on, I could do it my own way. I'd live without them. I felt bad about having attacked my parents but I knew they would never be able to admit that they were wrong, that they abused and neglected me. And that's exactly why I didn't want my sons and daughters to contact their grandparents anymore. I didn't want them to get caught between hammer and anvil in that conflict of ours.

We all sat down on the sofa, Janek on my lap, Hannah against me, Eli and Yentl with their feet on the sofa, their chins on their knees. I told them gently that Grandma and Grandpa wouldn't see us anymore.

"Why not?" they asked with surprised little eyes.

And with my heart full of pain I explained to them that when Mommy was a little girl, evil people had hurt her very much.

"Did Grandma and Grandpa know that?"

“Not always, but I have told them several times.”

“And what happened then?” Eli asked.

I looked at him and caressed his head.

“They didn’t believe me, Eli,” I answered sadly.

“Even now that Mommy has become a big person, they still don’t believe that Mommy has had lots of pain because of what those bad people did to her.”

Eli and Yentl frowned their eyebrows, thinking. The two little ones didn’t realize the importance of the conversation and were playing with my long hair.

“That’s not nice of them,” Eli whispered.

“No,” I answered, feeling my throat tighten.

We hugged each other. I answered their questions, trying not to make their grandparents look too bad to them. I didn’t want them to go on with bad images in their head that woke them up at night. We talked about the family we still had, like my in laws and Annie on the farm, about aunt Bea and uncle Miguel, about our friends whose children they grew up with. I explained that sometimes friends were just like family. Because being family meant that you loved the people around you and did everything to support and help each other. That too my sweet kids understood. We were so close together and I was filled with love for my four little kids. I loved them so intensely that I was about to start crying.

“I love you,” I whispered and they stuck to me even closer.

“We believe you Mommy,” Eli said.

“Thank you Eli,” I smiled.

This was the most beautiful present I ever received and I promised myself that I would remember this special moment my entire life long.

49. The press storm

What I expected happened, a press storm broke loose. Newspapers described how ill my poor mother was. The TV had shown her lying on a bed with plastic hoses in her nostrils; they hadn’t told the public that she had been a chain smoker for many years. They mentioned my father’s miserable childhood, showing photographs that were really pathetic. My mother, a hush puppy look in her eyes, my father with slanted head and big sad eyes should convince the readers that I was bad, really bad. Some media even managed to publish a weekly article “The lies of X1” in very large fonts. My mother’s brother, his son and a whole bunch of family members were allowed to voice their complaints, and boy, did they like it! It made them famous for a few moments, like Kathy, the neighbour’s daughter who preached her expert opinion “She’s totally nuts, Sir!” with grand enthusiasm. I was amazed that obvious mistakes from the press were labelled as lies from X1. But since I couldn’t possibly fight every blunder or insinuation, I put the newspapers to their most efficient use by peeling my potatoes on them. My parents played their part with a lot of conviction, the way they always did. I have to admit they seemed to be much better actors than me. While I kept my distance from the press, they skilfully manipulated the sentiments of the readers. Sometimes they goofed and started stuttering. I almost died of laughing when I heard my father say on the news:

“I don’t know a T. Sir, I don’t know who she’s talking about,” then looked at my mother asking,

“Do you know a T. other than Tony?”

Suddenly he remembered that Tony started with a T and then said that he was a friend of the family.

“A real nice person Sir.”

Annemie and Douglas gave my father a hard time when they asked him if they contacted Tony lately.

“No,” said my father with his innocent surprised voice.

“Really not?”

“No,” he repeated, really convinced this time.

Then the journalists showed him the record of a conversation that had taken place not long before and had been registered on the Zoller system, that is used by the police to track phone calls. It was an eighteen minutes long conversation with Tony!

VTM, another Belgian TV station in the Dutch language had sent a team of reporters to my house but because they were so arrogant I had thrown them out. They didn’t forgive me for that. They had obviously decided to ridicule Panorama. They made a programme (*Telefacts*) showing classmates and former teachers who obviously didn’t know about my secret. I never saw the programme myself but a lot of friends and victims of sexual abuse reacted to this program with a lot of anger.

I was more concerned though about what they told about me in *Au nom de la loi* (*In the name of the law*), the flagship of RTBF (*a Belgian radio and TV station in the French language*). It was obvious that the reporters had been leaked information from the police. They showed my face with music and images from *The Blair Witch* in the background. This dirty trick will be shown later in “Belgium’s X-files”, an excellent programme about Marc Dutroux made by Olenka Frenkiel from the BBC.

The information they showed on RTBF was biased and carefully calculated. Every little mistake I had made was blown out of proportion. First names that weren’t correct, fake license plates, all these little errors that the abusers taught us on purpose – why take the risk indeed to use their real name if the fake one seems real to the child – now seemed to be the “evidence” that victims of networks fantasized about their traumas. The large amounts of gruesomely correct details that I had provided were omitted. It frightened me to realise that from now on, all victims would be ridiculed and destroyed. That an important part of the media co-operated with this cover up operation gave me the creeps.

When doctor Igodt, the leader of the team of psychologists that evaluated me declared on TV during an RTL programme begin 1998 that “X1 was a well-balanced woman whose testimony had its importance, he was immediately branded a “believer”.

For hours in a row the media showed the funeral of Julie and Melissa, with all the necessary sentimentality. They called for revenge and heavy punishment of the abusers but when witnesses showed up, when victims had mustered up the courage to break the code of silence, they tried to shut them up brutally. I got the impression that paedophile networks were treated in Belgium like the concentration camps in Nazi Germany. Even today there are negationists who stubbornly deny the existence of the camps. Unfortunately, unlike the SS, the abusers in Belgium had gotten all the time in the world

to destroy the evidence or transfer it to safe places. I seriously doubt that one single movie will be discovered showing me as a child.

A large amount of videotapes clearly showing the paedophiles' faces had been found at Dutroux' place, and also at the houses of other paedophiles like Raemakers, who had been convicted to life in prison. I have never heard about prosecutions of the people on the tapes. No newspaper asked whom these many anonymous children on the videos were. Nobody in the justice department seemed to worry about it because most of the tapes had been destroyed. The anonymous little faces had faded away in the flames, even before anyone had gotten the chance to identify them. Were they still alive? Did they die, tortured to death in snuff movies? Nobody seemed to care. That's what was unbearable to me!

The aggressive tone of certain magazines, newspapers, and TV programmes was scary. This wasn't normal anymore. How strong must the abusers feel themselves now? For a moment I had probably scared the living daylights out of them but they had to feel safe again now. And what more could I do to turn the tide. I felt really bad for the little victims. Had everything been useless? Had I been so damn stupid to believe that my testimony would help other victims? The signals from the press were clear enough. Shut up otherwise you'll be dragged through the mud. I was insane, a pathological liar who had invented networks that didn't exist in Belgium. Even Dutroux was carefully being justified. He was just a lonely paedophile who had had a terrible childhood, a psychopath. But why did he have these cages in his cellar? And who had so brutally raped Melissa when Dutroux was in prison? Dutroux had indeed been in prison for three months when Julie and Melissa were supposedly in the cage in his cellar. He pretended that he had asked his wife to feed them but she would later state that only once she had put some food at the entrance of the cage, because she was too scared to go inside. According to Dutroux he had found one girl dead and the other dying when he returned from prison. He said he had never raped them. But nobody asked questions anymore. Only a few reporters still listened to me, to my cry of distress. But they were not allowed to publish or transmit. They all told me that their bosses were muzzling them.

"At least you tried," Erwin comforted me.

I nodded. But I was afraid I would have to give up my farm because my sales figure was plummeting. Nobody wanted to do business with a lunatic woman while reporters were all over the place. Fortunately there were the phone calls, the postcards and letters from people supporting me. Fortunately there was Tiny, the mother of the two disappeared children Kim and Ken, who became a good friend of mine. She repeatedly let me know that she supported me and that she had gone through the same ordeal. Her suffering was indescribable. Imagine yourself being a mother, not being taken seriously when you tell the police that your children should have been home a long time ago already, and that on top of that the police tell you that you are suspected of murdering them!

I was so grateful for the friends I had. I let Erwin hug me and together with the kids we tried to spend the scarce leisure time we had left right now, as happily as possible. The teachers and the school director took really good care of the kids too. I was happy that I knew so many intelligent and good people.

50. The March against Silence

But a few good men and women didn't give up. Marc Reisinger, a psychiatrist who was the driving force behind the Brussels group *Pour la Vérité (For the Truth)* became a close friend. He wanted to uncover the truth and help the victims, without putting himself in the spotlights. I admired his courage and energy very much. It was Marc who called me and motivated me for a new White March, the March against Silence on 15 February 1998. I was still uncomfortable around people, certainly now that I was being portrayed as a roving lunatic, but I felt that I had to be present this time. I had already missed the first White March but this time I'd support the parents, to give a face to the victims. I agreed with Marc that we would walk together, that way I didn't have to face the horde of press guys all by myself. It became a unique experience, which liberated me from the fear of mingling in a crowd. Together with Erwin and my dog Tembo, who followed me around everywhere and was my favourite animal, I walked among the people. Some embraced me and shouted encouraging words, others kissed me and allowed their tears to flow freely. Witness X1 had become a symbol, like it or not, of the malfunction of justice and police. Many understood that a cover up operation had started and made this clear to me by expressing their sympathy for my struggle. I felt relief when I could get away from the crowd for a moment behind the stage that had been put up. Tiny was there too and when I embraced her, dozens of flashlights went off. I petted Tembo, the most famous German bulldog of Belgium. He wagged his long tail whipping away a couple of journalists. I liked this sweet (little) revenge.

I met Karel Pyck, youth psychiatrist and lecturer at the Leuven University. He too had been hit by the backlash, as he denounced the negationist evolution in the press and among magistrates. He had supported victims before and had become the villain. He went through a very depressing period all by himself, ridiculed and rejected by his colleagues and the press. He felt close to De Baets, the new backlash victim. We returned home happily after the March against Silence. The fighting spirit that had almost been eaten up by doubt and despair had come back. If so many people still agreed to march to break the silence surrounding the X-files, there was still hope.

51. The confrontation with my father

In February 1998 my heart stopped beating when I suddenly noticed agents from the Ghent BOB at my front door. Their self-complacent attitude and their disdain for victims intimidated me in advance. They had interrogated me the year before and their brutal arrogance had turned the hearing into a disaster. I opened the door, feeling the same fear and submission I had always felt with Tony, and let them in. I felt panic sting me when the one who had interrogated me the year before, demanded that I came to the office the next day. It was important, he said, at the same tone as Tony used to do, when he warned

me not to be late. I nodded. They could pick me up tomorrow. I knew why they wanted me there; it dawned upon me all of a sudden. They wanted to confront me with my father. The next day Substitute (*a magistrate*) De Rouck tried to convince me to fully co-operate. They wouldn't force me, oh no, but there were three of them around the table, and again I obeyed just as I always did with Tony. I was shaking inside and I put up a weak protest but in the end I gave in. They presented it in such a beautiful way. They wanted to listen to me. I was allowed to show sadness and pain, they'd give me all the time I needed. Then we went into the interrogation room. I heard the door close and they told me that my father was there too. I bowed my head. I didn't want to see him, I said bluntly. But here I was in the same situation as in the past. No clue on how to get home, totally dependant on the people who had power over me. They said I was allowed to make my own choice, but when I said I didn't want this, nobody got up. I started crying, I was so ashamed. Tears were rolling down my cheeks and I was trembling and stubbornly shaking my head. I didn't want to see him; I wanted to get out of there. Oh God, I didn't have the strength to let my father humiliate me again. But they didn't let me go this time either. They talked to me until I nodded yes.

The confrontation was pathetic. He kept lamenting that he didn't know anything and I tried desperately to confront him with things he certainly had to remember. But he didn't give in a millimetre. He didn't even admit that I often didn't get anything to eat. With the ease of an experienced actor, he lied that I got three meals a day and was never short of anything. He mentioned all the money my parents ever gave me but he didn't say that it was a bribe to keep me silent. How could I have been so stupid to go along with that, I bitterly asked myself. How could I have been so dumb to believe that they gave me money to compensate for the lack of love? How could I have been so naïve to believe that this money would never be used against me? I didn't know my father anymore. He had become a total stranger to me. Whatever tie ever existed between us, there was nothing left of it. It didn't even hurt anymore to see this. I looked at him and to my amazement, I didn't feel any love or regret anymore. His arguments – we have worked very hard for her and spoiled her rotten – didn't have any effect on me. I didn't feel guilty any longer. I bowed my head knowing that things would never be made up between us. And this gave me a feeling of relief. I knew now that I could give up all hope that he would ever be sorry about what had happened. And it was good to know this. It became a sad certainty today but that was still a lot better than the uncertainty I had lived in during the past months. What hurt me is that Substitute De Rouck acted as if it were a classic case of lack of communication between a father and his daughter. When would I finally be relieved of these useless hearings?

When I came home I cried, threw plates against the wall, lashed out at Erwin when he tried to come in my vicinity. I cut my arms again, hoping to make the pain and the panic go away but I was devoured inside. On TV I looked self-assured, laughing, as if everything were so easy, but if people just knew ...

Erwin grabbed me, pressed me against his chest and I started crying uncontrollably. I hit his shoulders with my fists, wanted to wrestle myself loose, but he held on to me, soothing.

“They hurt me so badly, Winnie ...”

I remember my father as a cold man, incapable of showing or giving love. Maybe this was caused by his childhood. He grew up in a miserable orphanage and went to work in a factory when he was fourteen years old. If he had been more fortunate as a child, he probably would have been a different person. His entire life he had been obsessed by the image that the outside world would have of him and his family. He liked living in his perfect make-believe world. I still don't know who he really was and what he really thought. He had never shown any spontaneity. He was so different from me. I was chaotic, spontaneous and optimistic in spite of the abuse. It was simply my nature to be full of life, and although they often tried, they never managed to break me. My father had imagined he would have a sweet and lovely little daughter, a kind of Goldilocks, but it didn't quite turn out that way. My mother was 33 and my father 36 when I was born. And this gave added responsibility to people who barely managed to keep themselves afloat. Family tragedies are often passed on from one generation to the next one. My parents chose to make money instead of sharing love and happiness with each other and me. My father gave me things, presents, toys, candy in exchange for services. Just like many other victims I learned that I could get what I wanted in exchange for sex. I learned at a very early age that this kind of trade was the only way of communicating with my father. When I wanted something I gave him what he wanted and so I got my thing too. He told the press repeatedly that I always got what I liked. I often think "You did too!" but I was embarrassed to say this aloud. For years I felt like an accomplice for having accepted toys, candy and money. It made me a "bad girl". I knew deep inside that something wasn't right about this, but I played along anyway.

Is it possible for a child to say no? As a young child you think your parents know what's good for you. You accept what they do because you're young and they're your role models. It used to be a businesslike transaction, I gave something and I got something in return. Nobody ever told me that there was anything was wrong with it. I only realized that trading sex for presents was morally wrong when I understood the meaning of the insult "whore". But that was many years later. And only then the guilty feeling came.

My father obviously didn't love me. I think that this was mainly caused by the fact we blackmailed each other. Because he rewarded me to keep my mouth shut, he was vulnerable. And it didn't make an easy child of me. But when I threw a fit he gave in quickly, afraid that I would burst the balloon of his fake world. That made me do what he wanted again and, the way I felt it, turned me into an accomplice and made me guilty again.

Everything had been OK until that day when I was one and a half year old and my father abused me for the first time. The trust had been shaken, that day we stopped being father and daughter. I indeed received a lot of toys, but they didn't make me happy. These presents weren't given from the heart. There was some unpleasant smell about them. They also increased the confusion every time. Was I good or bad? Was I bad because I gave my body, or good because I obeyed? On the one hand he gave me material rewards, on the other he despised me. He thought I was bad because I gave affection in exchange for toys and candy, but when I refused he stopped talking to me. But after a while he came up with a present anyway and I felt obligated to pay the price. It was a vicious circle, a downward spiral. I had depressions at a very young age. I wanted to sleep never

to wake up again, because my problems seemed to increase with the day. I felt weird. I didn't feel connected with other kids. They seemed to belong to an entirely different world. But I was afraid to be jolted out of my familiar environment, so I kept my mouth shut. I was filled with fear of not being able to survive in the other world. And after I had experienced how the police interrogated adult victims, I was damn happy that I had already gone through several years of therapy before my first contact with the Ghent BOB.

Imagine a fifteen year old being brought into a room with a big window of mirror glass, with a dozen BOB agents being present, dressed in civilian clothes, their pistol clearly visible – I had been threatened with pistols many times during all these years – and whose uniforms resembled my abusers' very much. They didn't bother to tell you who they were but stuck a big camera in front of your nose, after you have been raped countless times in front of the camera. As a fifteen year old I would have gone totally mad from fear and would have squeezed my jaws together, that I know for sure. I would have sworn on the Holy Bible that nothing was wrong with me until they let me go.

The reason sexual abuse can remain hidden from family and friends for such a long time is because the victim always gets punished the most. He or she is always the biggest loser. I gave my body to receive love in return but never succeeded. To the outside world my parents faked they cared for me, and they were believed, no questions asked. I stayed behind totally isolated. When I finally mustered up the courage to talk, I lost my family. My father could pretend, using his most innocent face that he had never seen anything, that I was spoiled rotten. Nobody has had the guts to ask him why then I was so early mature, why a group of psychiatric experts declared that I had been sexually abused repeatedly and for a long time, starting at an early age. If no journalist has had the guts to ask him that, why then was I attacked for having waited so long to talk?

52. Don't believe the victim, destroy her!

I was getting used now to the press harassing me, I was even getting used to the cameras. I didn't pay attention to them anymore. Even the looks from people who recognized me in the street had stopped bothering me. But I was still Ginny, an insignificant human being with a message. But although I pretended not to care, the lies that were published about me hurt me deeply. Sometimes I was so angry that I wanted to use my legal right to answer, but then I figured that it wouldn't make much of a difference anyway.

When I read an article from Frank De Moor, a reporter of Knack Magazine, I really got the shivers. He didn't hide that he had copies of the official police reports. He mentioned parts of the hearings, and I felt cheated again. The BOB detectives had promised me that my testimony was safe and would not fall in the hands of the press. That no one would read the reports except the people directly working on the case, that my testimony would remain secret and protected. But the press printed fragments that were totally taken out of context. The purpose was to show how De Baets had manipulated the hearings and how I

had given answers that didn't make any sense. Of course I had often answered, "I don't know", what else could I have done when I didn't know? Invent things?

The journalists from De Morgen were given a real hard time. Some demanded the resignation of the editor in chief, Yves Desmet. The police paid them a visit. Michel Bouffieux from Télémoustique came under attack too. Marie-Jeanne Van Heeswyck would eventually lose her job. All the people who held information about the cover up that was being organized were being targeted. Le Soir Illustré and Knack were left in peace and the same happened to the journalists from Au nom de la Loi; they all had ridiculed me.

The journalists who had taken me serious were being attacked, the cops who listened to me were being accused of leading the witness and had been thrown off the case, the people I had identified as abusers weren't bothered at all and me, I was branded a lunatic, an unreliable witness, a pathological liar.

The files could easily be closed now, who was still going to object?

Even Chrissie's parents had stated, together with their attorney, that nothing in my statements was true. I could understand them in a way; it must have been a real nightmare to them. The truth was probably too hard for them to live with, but it was so sad they that missed a unique opportunity to catch the murderers. Even without my testimony there was enough evidence to arrest the real killers. All they had to do was look into Dutroux' past, after they arrested him. They could have discovered, from the information in the old files that Dutroux and Nihoul had been meeting each other much earlier than they thought. They could have established that link. But they never did.

When I met Chrissie's parents at the BOB, they told me that they couldn't imagine that their daughter wouldn't have defended herself. But An and Eefje were older teenagers, abducted together by Dutroux. And although they were together, they hadn't been able to defend themselves. Dutroux knew how to use drugs like Rohypnol to sedate his victims. Chrissie often didn't come home, but they refused to admit this. They stubbornly maintained that they didn't have a clue about what their daughter had gotten herself into. I couldn't really blame them for that. I wonder if I would be able to live with such memories if my little daughter were murdered. Maybe I would like to believe that the witness was lying, to be able to move on in life without too much remorse and too many nightmares. But what made me really angry was the press interview with Substitute Paule Somers, the Brussels magistrate who worked on the mushroom farm file for Judge Vandermeersch. She pretended that I had taken the bait of certain suggestive questions from the parents and that they had trapped me that way. Of course she referred to Chrissie's trip to Canada with which Chrissie's mother tried to prove that I was making everything up. I showed earlier in this book that this was nonsense. I understood that parents denied such horrible events because they couldn't cope with them, but I didn't understand how a magistrate either lied or didn't react if she was quoted incorrectly. The cameras had registered everything. Why then did Mrs Somers send the wrong information into the world, while the video could prove the opposite? Were the videocassettes about to disappear too, just like a copy of the entire file on the mushroom farm had been stolen from a policeman's car in November 1997? Had they vanished already? I didn't know but I didn't feel comfortable at all.

It was stated also that Chrissie's wounds had other causes. This scared me. In the original files the wounds had been described, exactly the way I described them. And then, all of a sudden, when I seemed to remember too much, everything got modified. I didn't feel safe in Belgium anymore. I had kicked some powerful people's butts and made them nervous. I was afraid that the real harassment hadn't started yet. Were they going to put me through a second psychiatric examination, because Dr Igodts' report from the first one was too positive for me? Would they also appoint a team of psychiatric "re-readers"? Would they start harassing me administratively? Would they keep tapping my phone? They were tapping my phone indeed as I would soon find out. Did they want to prove that I was the gang leader of a conspiracy, left wing, right wing or any other wing, to bring down the government as some suggested? My sister in law and I had the same voice on the phone. Our voices were so identical that even Erwin and my mother-in-law never knew who was on the phone. And this must have caused some confusion at the Brussels BOB too. After the hearing that made Tania feel terrible, Eddy asked her if she knew anything about my lovers. Tania looked at him, surprised, and told him she had never heard or seen anything about lovers of mine; she started laughing, being very well aware of the fact that I was not interested at all in love affairs, and that I was faithfully married to Erwin for almost ten years now. She asked if he, Eddy, knew more about this. "Did you never hear her talk about some "Guy"?" Eddy asked.

Tania shook her head but remembered the name. When she told me about her experiences with the Brussels BOB, she immediately asked me who this "Guy" could be. I was totally caught by surprise and after some thinking I came to the conclusion that I didn't know anybody with that name. I forgot about this until Bea, my sister in law asked me if she was allowed to call Guy to find out if the new antenna she ordered for her GSM had come in already. Then it dawned on me why Eddy asked Tania if I had a lover. The BOB had obviously listened in on the telephone conversation during which Bea had been joking with a friend of hers. They had pretended they were lovers.

During my last hearing in Brussels in April 1998 the new investigators had shown me a series of fourteen black and white photos of Turkish looking girls who looked very similar. But I picked out the right photo of a girl that had been killed during a hunt. I was so tired. These hearings were totally useless. Their only aim was to prove that I made everything up, or that De Baets had given me the information. I didn't feel threatened so much by my abusers anymore. I guess they'd think twice before doing something against me now. But I felt threatened by all those ridiculous conspiracy theories that went around these days. I heard from journalists that several investigations had started against De Baets and his team. They even interrogated his ex-wife to find out if, eighteen years ago, he didn't mention a certain Regina. At first they wanted to check if I didn't have a relationship with him, then they wanted to know if maybe I was his secret daughter! And if all of that wasn't absurd enough, they also wanted to know if he didn't know Tania before and if he hadn't arranged for her to call Connerotte exactly at the time when he was standing next to him in Neufchateau. Who was insane here?

It wasn't easy to be a survivor of a paedophile network. Although I was doing quite well in therapy, a part of the feelings of guilt, shame and sorrow remained. It felt mostly like a gnawing grief or a chronic pain. I coped with it like someone who has a physical handicap; you live with it because you don't have any other choice. What really helped me survive the negative attitude of the press and the BOB was my farm. When I got up in the morning, I didn't have time to brood over the smear campaign. I had to take care of my animals, work with the dogs, clean the kennels and go through the daily routine. From time to time a friend called me outraged, but I just shrugged my shoulders. It didn't matter to me any more what they said about me. I knew damn well what I went through, and I knew how I had always tried to tell the truth, or at least tried to be as accurate as I could be. I had made some mistakes, but I knew they were caused by the traumatic experiences I had endured, and nobody could make me doubt about my past. I hoped that, after all the emotions would have cooled down, I would be proven right, bit-by-bit. Paedophile networks did exist and I had to bear the consequences daily. It was really funny that every time I was losing faith and was on the verge of giving up, someone wrote me a letter or sent me a postcard, and this gave me the strength again to carry on fighting. I liked very much the letters from Ruf, a man who often wrote me a postcard or an entire letter full of questions and considerations. He was as concerned as I was about the fate of the little victims. His letters were often moving. This showed me that people with feelings really existed, people who didn't get influenced by an orchestrated negative attitude from the press. One day, when I was coming back from the store, putting my bags in the trunk of the car, a lady walked up to me to show me her support. I smiled at her, a little embarrassed, but it really made me feel good. I often felt like Don Quixote fighting windmills. Nobody seemed to want to listen to me. Nobody seemed to want to know that there were new little victims all the time. The abusers wouldn't stop; they only would if they were locked up and put through compulsory therapy. And the pimps would never stop, with or without therapy. They were criminals who exploited children, played and experimented with them, just as if children were merchandise. They made the children believe that it was their fault, made them dependent and loyal, and intimidated them into a code of silence. If nobody wanted to hear my cry for help, what would happen to the little victims who were being abused today? Sometimes I was really desperate. How could I possibly stop my abusers, and the new ones to come? What more could I do to make people aware of this terrible reality? Because it was not just a few victims I was talking about. It concerned large numbers of children who suffered anonymously day after day, or should I say night after night? According to statistics one girl out of four was confronted with sexual abuse, varying from being touched, to frequent abuse that went on for a long time, inside or outside the family. The number of boy victims was on the increase too. Networks consumed lots of children. It was a social problem comparable to traffic accidents and drug addiction, but it was a lot less visible. It was a creeping poison that worked in silence. It took more victims than most people thought.

I sincerely feared that Justice and the press had done an enormous amount of damage by breaking me down and ridiculing my testimony. Many abusers would see that the media supported them, and enabled them to go on more zealously than ever. Nobody criticized them, they weren't held responsible.

53. The confrontation with my pimp

I think it was Andy Warhol who once said “We will all be famous for fifteen minutes.” Forest guard Stéphane Michaux’ moment of glory came in the afternoon of 23 April 1998. He noticed a stranded car that was stuck in the mud on a dirt road in the woods. Inside the car was Marc Dutroux. Five thousand policemen with helicopters and support of the Army were looking for him; it was probably the biggest manhunt in Belgian history. Stéphane Michaux became an instant hero and received official congratulations. What had happened? Marc Dutroux was allowed to consult his judicial files at the Neufchateau Court House. He was supervised by two policemen but wasn’t even chained or handcuffed because this was against the basic human rights of the criminal. Criminals usually have more rights than victims. When he asked to consult another file, one policeman went to get it in another room. Taking advantage of a short lack of attention Dutroux knocked over the second policeman, took his gun, raced outside the Court House and carjacked the first car he bumped into. How could the driver have known that the gun wasn’t loaded! It was 15.15 p.m. Three hours later Dutroux was caught again on his way towards the French border. You would think it impossible for criminal number one to escape like this, wouldn’t you? Wrong! It was possible in Belgium, the land of unlimited opportunities for paedophiles. The escape made headlines all over the world. Immediately afterwards the Minister of Justice De Clerck, and the Minister of the Interior Vandelanotte resigned from office. This was a courageous act because it was very exceptional in Belgian politics that ministers accepted the political responsibility of blunders, even though they weren’t personally involved. And end April the Chief of the national police General De Ridder had to step down too.

I’ll never forget 23 April 1998 because this was also the day that I was confronted by Tony at the Ghent BOB. First I had to wait for hours in a poky little office, with a policeman as my guard dog, until they finally pushed me, deadly nervous and without any preparation, into the room where my pimp was already having a friendly chat with a police officer who was sitting at a desk. He was wearing black pants, a black shirt that wasn’t entirely closed – this alone made me take a step back paralysed with fear, obedient as in the past – and a matching tie from which hung a little Eiffel Tower. I really had to make an effort to sit down on a chair. I forced myself to look at him, how his left ankle rested on his right knee, the way he always used to do, how he still looked very vital and felt very much at ease. He hadn’t changed a bit. It was as if the energy he took from my little friends and me prevented him from getting older. But I felt old, ugly, scared, defeated. I remained alert though. I knew from the BOB agent who brought me to the office that he had partially confessed, so I tried to adapt my body language to look more assertive than I really was. For many years I had been trained to hide my real feelings. He had been my teacher and now I wanted to show him that I still knew all the tricks. I looked him right in the eyes. The seconds ticked away. With his typical accent he said: “Hello Regina,” and I kept staring at him. No guy, you don’t have to greet me. And I finally stared him down.

There were no cameras in the room. At this crucial moment the police estimated that cameras were not necessary. This made me understand a lot, and I knew that Tony would never have to suffer as much as I did during the endless interrogations. He didn't have to be filmed. The life of an abuser was so beautiful!

During the few minutes before the hearing started I realized in a flash that the only emotion that remained was a throbbing fear in my stomach. His abuse and his subtle manipulations had had a far-reaching impact on my life. In all these long years there hadn't been a day, when I got up in the morning, without feeling the pain he inflicted on me. There hadn't been a day without me remembering his face, his voice, and his touch. I swallowed my tears with great difficulty and felt anger and hatred rise from deep inside me, emotions that I had hidden for so many years, because I was simply forced to hide them.

"Why don't you just die?" I asked him, trembling with anger.

He looked at me for a second, surprised, and shrugged his shoulders. I noticed I had been making the same gesture for many years and this increased my rage.

"Do me a favour and just drop dead!" I hissed.

I didn't know if it hurt him but he didn't look at me anymore. He stared uneasily at the wall in front of him, but there wasn't anything else than boring beige wallpaper. The interrogation was terrible. The Brussels BOB agents were sitting beside him, the Ghent agents were sitting behind the desk. One of them asked the questions while another one, using two fingers, typed in the questions and answers on the computer keyboard. No psychological assistance. I was in a room with five men. My anger slowly faded and turned into a claustrophobic panic. I wanted to leave; I suddenly became scared to death. They didn't pause; they didn't allow me any time to recover from the shock of meeting him again. A Ghent BOB agent explained what I told them about the abuse and the torture Tony put me through. I shrunk together. My pimp was right there! That man who used to beat me up with sadistic pleasure, who raped my little friends to keep me silent, to that man the BOB agent explained what I had said. I had to fight to keep going, to struggle not to shout that I withdrew everything if they just let me go ...

This confrontation was pure hell. This was the most humiliating thing I ever went through. I was slowly dying there in that room. I wanted so much to go to sleep never to wake up again. Tony flatly admitted that he raped me in every possible way, several times a week since I was twelve years old, and that my parents knew about it. He first tried to say that I was fourteen but after a remark of mine he admitted that it started at twelve. He admitted, with a faint smile on his face, that he had a key of my parents' house. Stuttering, my head down, I told the policemen how he lent me out for the first time at the Ghent Feasts. He nodded and shrugged his shoulders. He even named the man whom I was only able to describe. He admitted that he forced my friends into sex games. He said he forced me to participate to make sure they wouldn't alarm their parents. The BOB agents typed in only a very succinct version. I looked at it with despair. Why didn't they use a video? Why did he get a chance to modify what he had said, after they repeated the question and didn't type in the first answer? Was this professionalism? These BOB agents wouldn't be removed from the investigation, I thought bitterly. I asked for a break to get out of this choking room for a minute but they refused. So I used my old trick and said I really had to go to the toilet. Danny, the Brussels agent followed me closely. Today

I was obviously much better guarded than Dutroux, who was at large at this very moment, but I didn't know that yet. Halfway down the corridor I leaned against the wall and started crying. I put my hands in front of my face; I was so terribly hurt! I couldn't go on with this. I felt the loss of my little friends, of my youth, of my babies, of my innocence. I cried and cried while Danny looked on, embarrassed. He tried to soothe me in a clumsy way, put his hand on my shoulder for a few moments, but I couldn't stop. After several long minutes I managed to walk through the corridor again, one step at the time. I concentrated on the movements of my feet and tried to move forward, but I had the impression I wouldn't be able to reach the toilet, which was only twenty meters away. This was exactly the same as after Clo, and Chrissie. Then too I thought I wouldn't be able to go on, that I couldn't live any longer. But life went on, as if my body reacted purely mechanically until my soul had absorbed the heavy shock. I didn't want it, but it happened, just like the beating of my heart. And look, I was able to open and close the toilet door. I was able to wet my face with the cold tap water. I managed to stroll behind the cop, back to hell, to the room where my pimp was waiting. There was no resistance; I obeyed Danny's voice that whispered "Come on! The sooner you're through the better". I wasn't free yet, I still obeyed.

I sat down again with my head bowed. I knew I should attack him, tell them what he did to me, and repeat what I had said during the hearings. But I couldn't. I might have been able to with my therapist present, or someone else I felt comfortable with, but I couldn't do this surrounded by people I didn't trust, people who looked at me mockingly.

"Come on, this is your chance, tell it right to his face!" joked the Ghent guy.

I wished him just one night in the hell I managed to escape from, without any help from the police or the justice department. I crawled inside myself, staring at the door. I kept staring at it, even when they asked me questions. Their voices seemed to come from far away. I was not really present in that room anymore. I wanted to go away, away, away. Tears were rolling down my cheeks but I couldn't stop them. Years ago I had the courage to stand up and resist my pimp. I had lost that courage. Couldn't anybody see this? The hearing went on forever. The compelling sound of the telephone helped me out of the cocoon that I had slowly woven around myself. The cop answered curtly, then hung up and said that I was allowed to make a short phone call to Erwin in ten minutes. He was worried. I nodded and my heart missed a beat. Oh God, Erwin. I needed you so much! I stared at the door again until the Ghent BOB guy got fed up with it and sent me to the adjacent office to call Erwin. With trembling fingers I dialled my number. After two rings Erwin picked up and I heard his familiar voice. I said hello, crying. He was sweet and understanding. He already called Bee and she too was anxiously waiting for me to come home. I could call her as soon as I got back.

Home? I couldn't imagine that this nightmare would ever end. I cried without being ashamed. Danny was discretely waiting in the corridor when I told Erwin that I didn't dare to attack Tony. He urged me not to give up. He said he'd wait for me no matter what time I'd be back.

"Don't let him walk over you Ginny, remember, I'm standing right behind you", he tried to support me, and I nodded. My tears were flowing freely now. It was as if all the pent-up tension had caused a dike-burst.

“Hey, do you know what? Dutroux escaped!” Erwin had his rather unorthodox methods to cheer me up. I was sobbing but couldn’t help laughing through my tears. Was he pulling my leg?

“Yes it’s true, but don’t worry, I just heard they caught him again.”

I shook my head and laughed and cried at the same time. This was only possible in Belgium, the country of Lucky Luke, the Smurfs and Tintin! I tried to look at it from the funny side but that had its limits. Today the parents of An and Eefje, of Julie and Melissa, of Sabine and Laetitia must have gone through hell again.

The hearing report was read aloud now. I didn’t pay attention; my thoughts were escaping home. It was my method of survival because otherwise I would run away screaming. The Ghent BOB guy gave me a pat on the shoulder telling me that I should be very happy. Happy? I looked at him and my eyes spit fire. Happy to hear that he had confessed without any regret, that he could walk away just like that, that he was allowed to make new little victims? Happy with this consolation prize? Why didn’t you just get lost!

That same day, before Tony admitted he was my pimp with the ease of a man who knew he would never do any time, the magistrates had decided to close the X-files including, of course, the X1 file. Finished, schluss, it was over. Go after the networks and attack them? Why did I have the illusion, back in 1996, that anything would change? I already knew in September 1997 that the X-files would be closed, but it hurt terribly to see it happen the exact day my pimp confessed.

Just when I had the impression that I would never be brought home again, Tony was allowed to leave and the BOB agents got ready to drive me home. Danny was silent during the ride. His usual nervousness was gone. I was broken, tired of fighting and he knew it. Did he feel guilty? After all, he had turned his back on his superior, adjudant De Baets and danced to commandant Duterme’s piping. I couldn’t feel sorry for him knowing that, no matter how bad he might feel now, he’d forget me in no time. I’d never forget how I had been treated though.

Erwin was waiting at the front door. He hugged me and I didn’t look back at the cops who couldn’t wait to leave. I wasn’t happy about Tony’s confession, I felt much too sad. I thought of my father and my mother who had allowed this suffering to happen and never had shown any remorse. They lied to the press,

“No Sir, Tony didn’t have a key, we didn’t know anything about this!” and said I was insane.

I had to struggle so hard to be believed and exactly at the time that my asshole pimp confirmed an important part of my story, they closed the files. I didn’t feel like informing anyone about this, it all looked so useless. But Douglas called me and after a short hesitation I told him that Tony confessed. He reacted in a much more enthusiastic way than I was used to from him. He pointed out to me that this was some form of recognition after all. I sighed. My parents had filed a complaint for slander and defamation of character, together with a demand for visiting rights of their grandchildren. This gave me something else to worry about.

Douglas called my mother. He told her in his phlegmatic way that Tony had confessed. There was a moment of silence, and then she said, not at all short of breath,

“This is impossible!” and threw down the phone.

When Douglas told me this I could finally smile. I hoped she was going to lose a night's sleep. De Morgen was the only newspaper commenting on this confession. The rest of the press paid hardly any attention to it. But I didn't give a damn anymore. I had lost, I surrendered, was everybody happy now?

54. The historic verdict

On Wednesday 29 April 1998 Substitute De Rouck from Ghent declared on TV that most of my testimony was baloney but that I indeed had had a sexual relationship with an older man from age twelve. I had however agreed to the relationship and my parents had condoned it. This statement would be part of the official general conclusion dated 2 June 1998, of the investigation into the murder of Carine Dellaert and contain the following text:

It has been established that Regina between her twelfth and her sixteenth year of age has had a sexual relationship with a much older and adult man named Van Den Bogaert Antoine. Regina had this relationship willingly and not against her will. Her mother knew about it, allowed it and even facilitated it. Her mother was at least platonically in love with the same Van Den Bogaert.

As far as all the other items are concerned: *and then follows the list (abridged):*

- *that I was abused by my father*
- *that my grandmother forced me to be a child prostitute*
- *that Tony lent me out*
- *that I had several children who were killed*
- *that I met important people during sex parties*
- *that I had contact with other girls from the network e.g. Carine Dellaert and Vero D.*

have not been confirmed during this investigation. It hasn't been shown at all that Regina's stories are true. Nothing indicates that this would be the case.

... *(more text)*

More specifically concerning the story of CLO it appears clearly that the CLO described by Regina doesn't correspond at all with the girl Carine Dellaert. Furthermore nothing has been found that can prove that CLO has really existed.

..... *(more text)*

The accusations of abuse by Tony or that he lent her out have not been confirmed by him.

And that's it. Tony would never be arrested. During her last hearing on 6 May 1998 my mother would admit that Tony had the house key and that he had a sexual relationship with me.

After this verdict an offender could admit that he had abused a child “in every possible way”, between her twelfth and her sixteenth year of age, with the permission of her parents, with her little friends witnessing, without being punished. He would be allowed to have a ‘relationship’ with the twelve year old, so everything’s fine, why bother?

This was more than just a hit below the belt. This completely ridiculed all the victims of sexual abuse. In which century did these people live? In the century of child labour, or was it “Ich habe es nicht gewusst”? Sexual abuse is OK as long as it doesn’t bother us personally? I sadly shook my head. The telephone hadn’t stopped ringing after this ridiculous verdict. Lots of people showed their support; many knew what it was like to go through hell, and others hadn’t experienced it but could very well imagine what it had to be like.

After this verdict the law had abandoned the victims of sexual abuse.

But, strangely, more and more people listened to me now, appalled by what had happened. I was not fighting alone any longer. The group of people that had become aware of the arrogant complicity of people with cushy positions among magistrates, politicians and civil servants was growing steadily.

I didn’t believe in big conspiracies. Nor would I volunteer to be a musician in the band of the Titanic that stubbornly kept playing while the ship was going down. But people would have to be forced to review their idea about the world, their modern civilized world. They liked so much to close their eyes. But more and more people started sharing my views now.

It was high time to admit that sexual abuse, individually or in a group, organized or not, was a disease of our society, a cancer we couldn’t ignore any longer. Children had become merchandise, things we could show off with on postcards, in slogans and in speeches. Children were being sold because adults could benefit from it, it was never the other way around. The big institutions and the crowds didn’t want to hear about it, they didn’t want to change their ways, come to realize the magnitude of it. Individuals did.

Patrick De Baets and his team, Annemie Bulté, Douglas De Coninck, Karel Pyck, Tiny Mast, Patsy Sörensen, GP-er Suys, Mike, Paul Bottelberghs, Marc Reisinger, Tania, Bee, my sweet Erwin, Connerotte, Bourlet, Chantal, Chantje, Nathalie, Bea, Miguel, Marika, Tony M., An, Sanne, Dirk and Paul, Annie, Anke, the other X-witnesses, Carine Hutsebaut, the anonymous policemen supporting me by ensuring that the large amount of information didn’t get lost, Christine Mussche, the journalists who listened to my story in an incorruptible way and tried to bring it, honestly without trying to be sensational, Liliane Moerman, Frans Lozie and Vincent Decroly from the Green Party, Patrick Moriau, parents and boy scout leaders, Marie-Jeanne Van Heeswyck, Ruf, and scores of anonymous people whom I couldn’t list here because there were so many of them that it made me feel overwhelmed.

By breaking the code of silence I had chosen the hard way. I knew very well that I was going to be quarantined, declared insane, dragged through the mud. But I did what I had to do, not simply because I chose to do so, but because I was inspired to. I had a strong feeling that in spite of all that negativity, my testimony had brought people closer

together. People who wanted our society to be better, who didn't want to keep listening to the sinking ship's band. Respect and dignity, generosity, fighting for others knowing that it might hurt their career or even endanger their life, selflessness ... a deep love and respect for life, the life of a child, of an adult, of every living creature. I have met these people and they have made my life so much more valuable. These people have given me back what others i.e. the civilized, conservative crowd, had taken away from me. They gave me back the capability to trust people, to love life. I have become a richer more complete human being. For the first time I felt safe and protected, and I knew my choice was the right one.

And all of you who want to listen, you have chosen the right way too. Are you afraid to know that people can treat children in such a cruel way? Do you prefer to close your eyes and forget? I understand though, I really do. Don't believe me if you don't want to. Believe that I'm a nutcase or a pathological liar if you wish, but I won't be the last witness. Every day children are forced to go through the same ordeal as I did, because negationists abandon them. Each day, here and abroad, children have to endure similar acts of cruelty. Many of them don't survive, but some make it into adulthood, as I did. The larger the group of people gets who dare to listen, the bigger the chance is they'll muster up the courage to speak.

Children, adults who suffered the way I did, don't remain silent! Silence is for the abusers. Liberate yourself; help us carry your weight. Live!

A few weeks later the Ghent Prosecution followed up by closing the file, kicking me in the back one last time by considering Tony's confession to be an element of little importance. Had they forgotten the name of the guy Tony admitted lending me out to? They nicely admitted though that I had been sexually abused, but that the abuse had taken place with "other people" and at "other places". This almost made me burst out laughing were it not so tragically unbelievable. Did they indeed mean that there was still another network?

"It has been enough now," said Prosecutor Soenen, repeating what had been said by Prosecutor-General Anne Thilly from Liege almost word for word, "This is the last thing I want to see being written about it."

And justice for all!

55. Mieke speaks out and gets locked up in a mental institution

Mieke, a girl from the network and a little "colleague" of mine during my Knokke period, had disappeared out of my life since May 1979 when I was abruptly moved to Ghent. She suddenly showed up again in 1998. I immediately recognized her and felt elated as if it were a major victory. She had been resilient too and was still alive. She too recognized me immediately and felt the same shame and guilt towards me as I felt towards her. We both felt that we had abandoned each other, we both believed that we had hurt each other but I touched her and told her this wasn't the case. The abusers had hurt us, had forced us

to do things we were unable to refuse. I knew that I would have to repeat this little sentence many times, but I didn't mind doing that at all. If there was one thing I insisted on then it was the importance of liberating the victims from their feelings of guilt. Because guilt belonged to the ones who raped us; to the onlookers who didn't do anything to stop it; to those who closed their eyes.

Mieke was shy, almost destroyed, and she had gotten herself into a downward spiral of problems that had taken away her joy of living. Her story made my hair stand on end. She had demanded to be able to react after the denigrating Telefacts programme that had been made by VTM in the beginning of January 1998 as a reaction to my appearance on Panorama. Before the shooting of her testimony started she suddenly got put into mental institution. She lost her house, her friends and her little daughter. The girl was sent to foster parents.

Mieke and I were a dangerous duo, because she too had been part of my network, thus she knew the same people, the same places, the same names. She confirmed my story. We didn't understand the nature of the forces that got unleashed but it soon became obvious that they want to shut Mieke up. They wanted to keep us apart from each other. With my natural stubbornness I took her under my wings and accepted my "little sister" in our family on the farm. And slowly, a little more each day, Mieke's fighting spirit started to come back. After three months the pale, withdrawn Mieke had become a strong young woman, and although the struggle to get her daughter back was a huge undertaking, she persevered in not giving up. I was proud of her. And I joined her fight because I wouldn't allow anything or anybody to stop me anymore. Almost twenty years ago now, I had bitten and scratched an abuser who was causing her too much pain, now I was fighting again for her and her little daughter.

I couldn't stand injustice; this was a fundamental part of my personality. But it surprised me that I could still feel so much love. It looked as if my heart was stretchable. I loved Mieke, as much as I loved Erwin, my children and her little daughter. I loved all the animals who suffered, every individual who had been treated dishonestly. And the more I loved the people around me, the less I felt anger and bitterness. I who thought never to be able to love again, I dared to open my heart again. I was not that scared anymore to be taken advantage of, to be hurt, ridiculed. And this felt like a major victory. They hadn't been able to take that away from me.

I felt a strong urge to meet other victims, maybe the other X witnesses. I was worried about them. Knack magazine kept publishing vicious articles about them. The journalist, Frank De Moor, yes always the same one, didn't know any of them personally. He refused to see me as if he owned the truth. The other victims didn't choose to become known in the press, like I did, and it made me very angry to see how he tried to ridicule their testimony. Even if there were some inaccuracies in their testimonies, the sole fact that they had the courage to come forward and tell about their past, their torturers and the things that happened, should inspire the reporter to observe at least some basic human decency.

56. Our tenth wedding anniversary

I had to have surgery but I was still terrified of doctors. I delayed the surgery for a week because we had to appear in juvenile court. As I said before, my parents had sued me for slander and demanded visiting rights of their grandchildren. My father showed up all by himself. Erwin and I were accompanied by the White Committee¹ from Ghent, people from the Brussels group Pour la Vérité, and the non-profit organization Kim and Ken². The press was there, of course, but I ignored them, annoyed. My lawyer was rather comfortable with the outcome, given Tony's confession. Not me, I had been through too much to believe in a happy ending. My father didn't show any sign of remorse, as usual. His lawyer was almost jumping up and down from anger. He heavily insulted me, in civilized legal words of course, and I had to make a big effort to keep myself under control. He demanded a social investigation to find out what the hell "was really true about this whole thing". To investigate what? Tony had confessed dammit. Christine, my lawyer, made a beautiful plea. I swallowed when I heard how carefully and sensitively she described the pain I felt and explained why my confidence in my parents was hurt. I didn't want to leave my kids anymore with people who had hurt me so deeply. No, I didn't want my children to still be part of their subtle games and their psychological warfare. And I definitely didn't want to run the risk that my children would be dragged into the network one way or another. The only thing left for me to do now was to protect my children. Only after they would have admitted that Tony had turned their daughter into a whore with their permission, only then I would accept a discussion. But I did know that they would never admit this, even not after having read the text of the "historic verdict" that clearly stated that my mother knew about it and facilitated it.

The night before the surgery I cried myself to sleep softly. You did this to me too, I whispered to the walls. I went down hill physically. My fingers were stiff, my joints suffered from arthritis. Back in Knokke I often dropped a brick on my fingers behind the little garden house, because I didn't want to masturbate the men I was sent up in the room with. If I couldn't find a brick, I slammed my fingers against the wall, until they had become red and painfully swollen. I thought touching those men was so disgusting. But now I suffered the consequences of my self-mutilation. My hands had become two clumsy paddles. I couldn't tie a knot anymore, close zippers, or get buttons through the buttonhole. Grooming the dogs had become difficult. There was this permanent pain in my joints, which made me aggressive because it reminded me of my past in Knokke. I tried to save my fingers as much as possible, knowing they would never heal completely. My back hurt all the time too, because my abusers had kicked it countless times.

¹ In the wake of the arrest of Marc Dutroux White Committees were established all over the country. Their aim was to make people more vigilant to the reality of pedophile networks, try to uncover the truth and remember the many victims.

² Kim and Ken are the murdered children of Tiny Mast (see before)

My body had been used at a moment when I was young and blooming. Now the beauty had gone, and this hurt me sometimes. I felt old and tired. I often had the feeling that I had lived two lives already but I never could enjoy being young.

After the operation I was very weak and I stayed in a chair during the day. I was not into my daily routine anymore and this made me slide into one of the deepest depressions I've ever known. For several weeks I had to drag myself through the days. All the emotions, all the fear and tension seemed to slow down my recovery. The police had interrogated me since 1996 and in 1998 the harassment by the press had come on top of that. I had reached my limits. But fortunately I had my sister-in-law, Mieke and Erwin, doing the work, taking care of the kids and allowing me to slowly crawl out of the hole again.

On 29 June 1998 Erwin and I would celebrate our tenth wedding anniversary and I wanted to organize a big barbecue. Because of the depression I couldn't afford to do a lot but my "sisters" ran the entire operation marvellously and I was slowly gaining strength again. When the phone calls started coming in from the people who wanted to come to the party, I had gathered enough energy to smile again. I drew the pattern that had to be put on our old wedding rings. The rings were from the time my grandmother was still alive and I didn't like to wear mine anymore because of the bad memories. I wanted a special ring that symbolized our marriage. I choose symbols in Cree, a Native American language. They looked a lot like the Viking rune signs. The symbols meant "freedom to all people".

I had acquired my own personality now, my multiple personalities were no longer required. Nature had taken its course. The borders between the alters were gone. All sorts of feelings, including pain and anger, had blended together. I had grown into one person. This is normal to most people but it was a magic discovery to me. No discussions in my head any longer, no excessive mood changes anymore. This was the birth of a new human being.

I knew now that recovery was possible. Just as it was possible to split into different personalities as a child, in order to survive, there was a possibility of integrating these personalities into a single one again. Not with high tech psychological tricks, but with confidence. By simply having the confidence that your body and mind would eventually find the proper way out. It was weird that I fell into a depression right at the moment that I had developed my own personality and that all fundamental characteristics of my alters had blended together into one. But this depression seemed to be a transition. It finally allowed me to mourn the loss of my little friends, my babies, my parents and all the rest. For the first time in twenty-nine years I could spontaneously feel all my emotions, without separations between them. I finally knew who I was.

And the party turned into a huge success. For the first time I felt surrounded by real family. I enjoyed the peace and serenity. I remarried Erwin, in our own way, in total harmony with nature surrounding us. Again we put our unique wedding rings on each other's fingers, and promised to keep fighting for our principles, against all kinds of injustice inflicted on people. The campfire was lit late at night and people sang and talked. Ruf played his didgeridoo, giving the evening a touch of magic.

57. Intimidation, harassment and cover up

The re-readers of my testimony had produced four reports; the last one was ready on 5 February 1998. Every report addressed different hearings. The re-readers must have gotten clear instructions to destroy my testimony because if my testimony would fall, the other X-witnesses could be discredited too and the danger for a group of important abusers would be gone. If you try to solve a crime isn't it logical that you try to investigate all the leads that could bring you closer to the criminals? I would think so. This wasn't what the re-readers did. They emphasised every inaccuracy and falsified important elements in my testimony, some of which were subsequently leaked to the "loyal" press.

As I mentioned before, in June 1998 a falsified part of my testimony about the mushroom farm appeared in a book with the ominous title "*L'enquete manipulée*" (the manipulated investigation) of René-Philippe Dawant a journalist working together with the leading TV programme in the French language "*Au nom de la loi*" (in the name of the law). He had been allowed to read my "true" testimony. Marc Reisinger the psychiatrist and the driving force behind the Brussels group *Pour la Vérité* discovered this and immediately alerted me. We compared sentence by sentence the new text with my original testimony and I got the shivers when I noticed all the falsifications. It gave me a creepy feeling to discover that "someone" had twisted the sentences in such a way, that it seemed as if De Baets had put all the answers in my mouth. Reisinger mentioned this in the RTL TV-programme *Controverse*, the same programme I first appeared on TV in, unrecognisable, and immediately a house search was ordered. Not at the house of the journalist who wrote the book with the manipulated testimony, but at Marc's house, who had had the nerve to bring this out in the open.

The Parliamentary Dutroux Commission was denied access to the reports of the re-readers and when the Commission wanted to look at the way the investigation into the mushroom farm murder had been carried out they met heavy opposition from the Brussels magistrates.

Based on the reports of the re-readers, and in particular the first one, which was made by three French-speaking re-readers, my testimony got destroyed and consequently the other X-witnesses got discredited too. Although Dutch-speaking policemen joined the team later, the re-readers made several important errors when they translated my testimony from Dutch into French e.g. they translated "a snake that could strangle me" (i.e. the snake that Annie brought along to the mushroom farm), into "Boa Constrictor" while there are many snakes that can strangle children. But the BOB guy didn't know the correct French word and took Boa Constrictor, not realizing that such a snake could reach a length of ten meters and cannot be lifted. Consequently this part of my testimony was considered hardly believable.

Many other elements had been wrongly translated, even at crucial points. When I described a torture that ended with death and mentioned a metal object, the translator turned it into a knife, and during the second re-reading (where they translated the

translation a second time) it became an axe. All these mistakes were put on my account and I couldn't defend myself. Only the videos and the original minutes in Dutch were the correct reflection of what I said, but this material wasn't used.

Frank De Moor from Knack magazine systematically attacked the X-witnesses and made no secret of it that he had access to the files. Do you think his house was searched? Of course not.

On 29 April 1998 the newspapers De Standaard and Het Nieuwsblad would publish the twelve reasons why the Brussels judicial authorities concluded that I was not present at Christine's murder. A little later the X1 testimony would officially be declared totally useless.

Also on 29 April 1998 Substitute De Rouck from Ghent declared on TV that most of my testimony about the murder of Carine Dellaert (Clo) was baloney. Clo probably never existed or was certainly not Carine Dellaert.

Antwerp had stopped investigating my testimony concerning the murder of Katrien De Cuyper in the same period and on 21 October 1998, the Minister of Justice, Tony Van Parijs would declare that "Investigating Magistrate Vyncke had decided to close the verification of the X1 testimony based on the conclusions of a meeting between magistrates from Ghent, Antwerp and Brussels."

The national police kept harassing individuals who reported irregularities in the handling of my files. De Baets, and most of his team members had been kicked out. In September 1997 an investigation would start against them. They would eventually be cleared of all charges.

News reporters told me that they were not allowed to support me anymore or to ask annoying questions about the investigations.

People who supported me or were close to me were being targeted. Mieke would be unable to get her little daughter out of the hands of the foster parents organization. This would drive her into a depression.

BOB agents interrogated my veterinary surgeon. He used to come by to worm and vaccinate my sheep and has known me for twenty years. He spontaneously testified at the Ghent BOB that he had always known me as a calm, quiet and intelligent young girl, but that he hadn't seen me at home very often when he came to my parents' house late in the evening to take care of their dogs. A year later the BOB agents would specifically ask him if he treated the sheep of X1. My vet smelled a rat, worked them out of his house and told me about it.

I discovered that the BOB had only interrogated those people from my surroundings who didn't remember anything or hadn't noticed that anything was wrong. They had never talked to the parents of a former classmate from Knokke. Their little daughter often walked with me to my grandmother's country house after school, and one day I had been brave enough to describe certain things that had happened to me. The girl was so shocked that she had told her parents. They wanted to know who I was and invited me over for a birthday party. And indeed, I started telling them things, probably because I had reached the limit of what I could endure. I told them stories that made their hair stand on end.

They both knew that I, as a ten year old, couldn't imagine those kind of stories unless I had been involved. Concerned, they told the school principal. Unfortunately she informed my grandmother and I got severely punished for my indiscretion. And thus I disappeared one month before the end of the fourth grade as I described in the beginning of this book. I had forgotten all this, but the parents of my little classmate still remembered this clearly because they thought that I had been taken away by the child protection services and was safe now at a different place. After I had become known through the press they realized that I hadn't been helped at all. As soon as I had left Knokke the rumours had stopped and the abuse of children could go on undisturbed.

The BOB obviously didn't think these witnesses were interesting enough to be interrogated.

A little later I discovered that Clo, who probably never existed according to the Ghent investigators and certainly wasn't Carine, had classmates who called her Clo too. One of them confirmed that only a very few people knew her under that name and that she believed me as soon as she heard me talk about "Clo". The description I gave of Clo matched with what she remembered about her.

Months later an older woman approached me and confirmed that another little victim that I had named had died indeed in very strange circumstances. I nodded. Sometimes I would prefer to be proven wrong.

These witnesses and many others who could corroborate my story had never been interrogated and after what happened to me, it was easy to understand how scared they were to testify. I understood them, although I was often angry because I felt that I couldn't convince these people to talk, but I didn't want to force them. The signals from the press were clear; they were in accordance with what Tony had said: "Everybody who supports you will be destroyed."

As a consequence I joined the platform 'Break the Silence' a group consisting of vigilant citizens and victims of dysfunctions in the justice system or in politics. As a group we were stronger, we could support each other better and mobilize the population. Although the different issues were sometimes far apart, the similarities were striking. The way the investigations were killed, how testimonies were modified or ended up under a layer of dust, how abusers or the ones who gave the order always stayed out of reach, and how incorruptible investigators were taken off the case as soon as there was a possibility of a breakthrough. A good example of another major enigma was the so called "Nivelles gang", which carried out a series of brutal attacks on shopping centres in the early eighties killing dozens of people. The investigation had been sabotaged just like the investigation into the paedophile networks. The case still remained unsolved. Dozens of murders, unsolved, can you believe this?

58. Paedophile networks don't exist in Belgium

The summer was hesitating to break through. Rainy days were alternating with days with a timidly shining sun. But here on the farm, it didn't matter what kind of weather it was. For the first time in my life I felt liberated from the yoke of my parents, and I was thriving. I believed I had become a good mother to my kids and we spent a lot of time together. One evening we decided to take our kites to the sea. We quickly loaded the kids into the van and in the evening when all the tourists had gone back to their apartments, we started running through the sand and flew our kites in all freedom. Janek nose-dived into a tidepool and screamed with laughter. We ended up fleeing from the rain that all of a sudden poured from the sky. I never felt so happy in my entire life.

To walk through a natural reserve with the rain splashing on our heads was a fantastic experience. I could never have played with my parents, or make them do crazy things like my kids who managed to make me do summersaults between the little creeks that had formed on the paths in woods. It became a real adventurous journey when we crossed through a "marsh" and sneaked along the reed in search of "pirates". We had become much closer because we survived the immense pressure from the outside.

But the thought of little children being raped and murdered didn't leave my mind. In 1988, when I first talked about my activities as a child prostitute at the organization called Against Her Will, nobody wanted to listen. Even psychiatrists and psychologists didn't want to admit that child sex networks existed, and certainly not in Belgium. My story, and I didn't even dare to mention at that time that children were also murdered and taken away from their families never to return, was too fantastic. Incest was just starting to become discussable. I stood alone and thought I was the only survivor. I felt so strange, so lonely and so ashamed. But now I knew that there were many of us, and although they didn't speak out for whatever reason, they suffered from the same traumas. Witness X3, for example, had written a book even before the Dutroux case broke loose. I read the book and immediately felt close to that woman although I had never met her. The feelings she described were so recognizable that it hurt. How could anybody have doubts about what we went through? This pain was universal. The fear of hearing the stairs creak, the fear of nightfall, the guilt we felt. It made me so angry to see how victims were being ridiculed. As a child we weren't believed and they shut us up. Did we have to go through the same as adults? Was a little respect too much to ask?

To obtain a correct impression on the number of child victims of sexual abuse, we need to show them more respect. We have to create a climate in which victims aren't any longer afraid to testify. Only when victims are listened to, even if the abuse happened a long time ago, when their story is written down and a profile of the offender is established, will we have a better estimate of the extent of the problem. I'm convinced that it will become clear then how alarmingly high the number of abused children really is, and how many victims one offender can make. We need an attitude change among the population, the national and local police and the politicians. It should be very well understood that abusers won't stop until they are forced to, and that they make more victims than commonly thought.

Suppose an offender makes his first victim when he's twenty and abuses the child for a few years, after which he takes a second victim and starts experimenting with several

children. At about thirty-five he will probably have become so cunning that he's able to abuse two or three children at the same time and can control them in such a way that he doesn't get into trouble with the law. At forty he has made six to ten little victims and he knows exactly what he has to do to silence the children; he knows how to pick weaker and lonely kids out of the crowd because he can make them dependent on him. He knows exactly when there is a risk of being discovered and he dumps difficult kids, replacing them with new victims. Encouraged by the fact that he hasn't gotten into trouble yet he starts experimenting more heavily. The perversions become crueller but more difficult to detect because he has perfected them and is able to make the kids shut up and obey in a subtle way. He has become really experienced now, reads books on child psychology (Tony even attended university classes on this subject), and knows the law and especially the holes in it, which is convenient in case things go wrong. He's still sexually active at fifty and even at sixty. Not many adults suspect that a sweet grandpa still has an active sex life molesting children.

At seventy he doesn't seem to be sexually active anymore but he has adapted his techniques. Even though he can't penetrate his victims anymore, he can still touch them, rape them with objects, and force them to watch porn movies. Even at eighty and, if his health permits, he can still abuse new victims.

During his "career" he has made many victims, girls or boys who go through life for many years with feelings of guilt, because he has made them believe it was their fault, because they wanted it so much. They become adults who are afraid to talk because they are ashamed or afraid nobody will believe them. Because the offender is often a well-liked individual, an intelligent person highly regarded by his surroundings, a close family friend, the father, the mayor, a priest, an uncle. Female abusers are even shrewder than men, and nobody suspects women to be capable of such cruelty. Victims of female abusers are hardly ever taken seriously.

So they can go on easily for many years, even if some victims or ex-victims send out signals. They aren't often believed, their complaint is not followed up on, and many times their complaint becomes extinguished under the statute of limitations. They can't prove anything because of the lack of hard evidence. And if there is any evidence e.g. photos or films, they aren't in the possession of the victim. If the police don't actively look for evidence, the victim remains a very weak opponent to the offender. The victim is indeed traumatized, feeling guilty, might still have some loyalty and is usually terrified. The offender is always prepared and knows what to say and what not to. Thus the complaint gets dismissed, the victim doesn't dare to open his mouth again and the offender gets confirmed in his status of untouchable.

The crueller the abuse or the torture, the less the victims are believed. People don't want to know what abusers can do to kids, that's why exactly the most sadistic abusers are the best protected. And victims of these sadistic abusers are often not capable anymore to produce a coherent testimony, except when they are interrogated under very favourable circumstances. This implies a special room, taping everything on video, specially trained interrogators who know how to talk to victims of such lengthy traumatic experiences. You also need magistrates and judges who know the consequences of sexual abuse, understand the symptoms, and know about the specific problems. There has to be good

communication between the interrogators and the magistrates, in order to exchange experiences and to filter usable evidence out of a testimony.

One has to clearly understand that the abusers are very intelligent, self-confident and shrewd individuals. And since it is clear that abusers won't stop by themselves, a probable offender should be observed, followed, and caught during the act. And if an offender is arrested it should be checked if he has already made several victims. One should anticipate that an offender always abuses several children.

Networks consist of many abusers who protect each other. Networks are therefore much less vulnerable than individuals who act on their own. The abusers don't have any other choice but to protect each other, and they often do this beyond the child abuse scene. They use each other's services, companies etc. They blackmail each other and form a very closed circle where everyone controls everyone. They know each other very well and alarm each other whenever there's a risk that something might come out. They exchange little victims, but also places where they can do their sickening things. Victims are often not capable later on to tell where exactly the abuse has taken place and who was present. By using strange rituals they make the abuse more threatening, more confusing and anonymous. Little victims aren't believed because nobody can imagine that such things can really happen. Often the child abuse is part of a deal between the abusers. They are on each other's board of directors, give each other contracts, and make illegal deals. The child prostitution is merely like sealing the contract, the cherry on the cake. Often the abusers aren't even paedophiles. They consummate children because they simply happen to be voiceless, dependent and mouldable.

A network can thus make countless, severely traumatized little victims, who mostly remain anonymous, invisible. Some disappear or die. Among the "runaways" there certainly are children who died in the network. From time to time a child commits "suicide" and a little body is found. But most of the time these cases remain unsolved.

But the public isn't aware of this because there's no such thing as paedophile networks, certainly not in our small country, according to the ones who create our opinion. If something isn't supposed to exist, it cannot be investigated and consequently doesn't make any victims.

So a network doesn't need a lot of organized protection but if push comes to shove, there will always be a couple of prominent citizens who can seriously obstruct an investigation. And as long as Justice keeps destroying videos and thus make it impossible to identify the abusers and victims, there will always remain doubts about the existence of paedophile networks. And network negationists ridicule victims who have the courage to talk about their experiences in the network. These people collaborate with the ones who want to sabotage the recognition of the existence of networks, and put the population to sleep. And the cover up operation is a big success. The abusers can go on, undisturbed, with renewed assurances of invulnerability.

Are there alternatives? The most important thing is to establish a team of police officers specialized in the detection of organized sexual child abuse and capable of attacking the networks. They themselves, and certainly their bosses, have to be convinced of the fact

that these networks are criminal organizations that do a lot of damage. It should be possible to hear the witnesses anonymously, if they so wish. The video material should be an essential element, because the body language of the victims, their hesitation, the way they explain or describe something is extremely telling. You can't see someone's fear from a paper report, how a witness suddenly whispers because she hardly dares to put into words what has been done to her. This is crucial information that gets lost if one only works with written minutes.

Recently aid workers and doctors have been allowed in Belgium to report sexual abuse without violating their professional secret and this is a very good thing. But if there isn't a specialized team of interrogators and if Justice doesn't show a lot of interest, what is it good for? There has to be a close co-operation between Justice, investigators, aid workers and victims. This co-operation has to include specialized services from other countries. Networks don't know borders indeed. Since children are in high demand, the supply has to keep up with it and thus foreign children – Eastern Europe is a favourite hunting ground at the moment – are imported, held captive somewhere and abused until they're used up. Business people and rich Belgians travel frequently and need to be supplied at their yachts and at their holiday resorts abroad. Many of them want children who are familiar with their language and customs; consequently Belgian children are being transported throughout Europe. There's intense smuggling activity back and forth but no one seems to take this seriously.

Networks do a lot of damage and by breaking down my story and not wanting to learn from what I have to say we will not save the children's lives. Can we allow this to go on? I can't. At least I try to fight back and change things. I hold every cop, every magistrate and journalist who, knowingly, looked the other way in my case, responsible for the death of all those children. By breaking me down, they protect the abusers. And I'll not just hold them responsible but will also consider them as accomplices, because watching and knowing that I'm telling the truth, is a criminal act if nothing is done with the information that I have provided.

Great injustice has been done to me. But I'll learn to live with it. I refuse though to give up and allow them to intimidate me.

I deeply respect the people who listened to me and tried to follow their heart and go after the abusers. There still are magistrates, politicians, policemen, psychologists, journalists and ordinary citizens who take my story seriously and who want to protect the victims the way it should be.

I lost my trust in institutions, but I still believe in individuals. I believe that the group of people, who don't accept anymore that so much injustice is possible in a so-called civilized country, is steadily growing. I don't believe that the population can be put to sleep that easily anymore.

Shall I go on? Yes I will.

I want to show to every child that cries itself to sleep after having been abused once more, that there is a way out. There is hope. I want to help carrying out that message. I have met people who hold a place in my heart forever. They fight to be able to do more for these abused children and the ex-victims.

They are the brave ones, and I'm so proud to be with them.

Epilogue

So, this is my story. But it doesn't end here. Almost four years have gone by since I published my story for the first time in 1998. The X-files had just been destroyed by the justice system and the press and were considered useless. The X-witnesses were portrayed as lunatics and even conspirators who wanted to bring down the government. My story was published in Dutch and in French, the main Belgian languages. Time has gone by. Some things have changed, others haven't.

My former pimp Tony who is now almost sixty, still abuses children in Belgium, The Netherlands, Germany and probably in other countries as well. He has a business in Poland now but I don't know how many children are disappearing there. He bought a camper, which makes it a lot easier to rape children in an anonymous environment and to make appointments with other paedophiles in parking lots along the motorway. He doesn't have to rent apartments anymore, he's mobile and fast, more elusive and better equipped than ever before. None of my abusers, except Tony, who had a confrontation with me at the Ghent BOB, has ever been punished, or even interrogated by the police. He admitted that he raped me when I was twelve and that he lent me out, but he was let go.

The policemen who worked under Patrick De Baets and were about to discover and prove the existence of my large network are not working as investigators anymore, except Danny. Some became ill from harassment by their colleges and bosses, and quit the police force, others went - or have been moved - to different assignments like Patrick who is now teaching interrogation techniques in the police academy, refusing to work anymore for our justice system. Patrick and his team were accused of manipulating the investigation, leading the witness, falsifying evidence and conspiracy. They have all been exonerated now. It was indeed almost impossible to falsify my testimony because all the interviews were filmed with different cameras to prove that there was no autocue with the right answers or someone holding up a board or signalling.

The new team of police officers, whose task it was to destroy my testimony falsified it in such a way that it became harmless to the abusers. They have never been accused of any wrongdoing. I filed a complaint that is still waiting to be handled in court. And since they acquired such a valuable experience with my case, they now work in the Paedophile Cell in Brussels, interrogating victims! These are the guys who thought that I was a child prostitute because I enjoyed it.

Prosecutor Bourlet is still there. He's a great man but he doesn't receive any support. The other judicial districts of Brussels, Ghent, and Antwerp are not co-operating. This is clearly shown by the refusal of Ghent to perform a test on the skull of Carine Dellaert to determine the exact time of her death and also by the refusal of Brussels to put a satellite tracking device in Tony's car long enough, as I described before. This makes it almost impossible to solve the Marc Dutroux case. Six years after his arrest Marc Dutroux is still

awaiting trial and all possible leads to prove that he had links to a paedophile network are systematically neglected. Around twenty potential witnesses have been murdered. It is so bad that the parents of Melissa, one of the murdered girls, recently decided not to be present at the trial because the outcome is already known i.e. Dutroux acted on his own and had nothing to do with a network.

Why he built the cage in his cellar, why he received money on his bank account after several kidnappings, who raped the girls while he was in prison, no answers. And all the testimonies and other evidence linking him to Nihoul are not being taken seriously.

The Dutroux case was originally connected to the investigation into paedophile networks. But Marc Dutroux has been in prison for almost six years now and his trial cannot be postponed forever, because Belgium would be convicted again for keeping someone in prison without trial for an excessively long period, as happened in the mushroom farm case with the punker who was the first suspect (see before). The delay has been caused by the enormous waste of manpower and energy trying to cover up the existence of networks and trying to prove that the testimony of the X-witnesses was useless.

But Prosecutor Bourlet was finally authorized to disconnect the paedophile networks case from the Dutroux case, and to treat the networks separately. This leaves a small chance that the testimony of the X-witnesses including my testimony will still be used. And I hope they will use my original testimony and not the falsified one. But of course the statute of limitations will allow the powerful paedophiles to walk; only the murders might still be investigated.

The journalists who wrote the most unbelievable things about me, who quoted the falsified testimony and did a lot of damage, not only to me personally, but also to all the other victims and witnesses, have been acquitted in court of slander charges because “they believed their sources”!

My parents had applied for visiting rights to my children, but my mother died in December 1998. My father who also abused me and admitted in court that he knew Tony was abusing me, was granted two hours visit a month, supervised (thank God!) in May 2000 by the juvenile court. One more of those court decisions!

I will never forget my abusers. Most of them are very wealthy and important men, but many are unknown to the general public. Some still come on TV from time to time and it hurts to see that some of them are still invited to important official occasions and even given a noble title. Pèpère died in 2001. I saw his funeral on the TV news. If people would have known! And a few months ago another important abuser died, I saw it also on the TV news. Is justice going to wait until they’re all dead before prosecuting them? And what about their sons, several of them who were also involved? I’m convinced that my network is still operating.

During my hearings I explained links between my abusers that nobody knew about. When De Baets’ team analysed their companies, contracts etc, they found out that I was correct. I knew their hobbies, country clubs, holiday homes, where they used to put their stuff in their expensive cars. I could describe their yachts that were often used for cruises with

important people. I participated on several cruises. I told the police where some of them had learned how to handle the crossbows that were used during the hunts. None of that was known to the public, or even to the journalists or policemen. But when they looked it up, I was right. And I can go on and on with details that our justice system, the police or the journalists couldn't explain. But they will never admit I witnessed it, I'm sure of that, because the consequences would be enormous.

I have the uncomfortable feeling that the ridiculing of my testimony, the discrediting of the police team that was closing in on the abusers, was orchestrated, to protect our fragile country, our credibility. But Belgium is strong enough to get rid of a group of perverts. We have brilliant, hard working and very competent people here and a new generation of young clean politicians. What are they waiting for to cleanse the Augean stables?

I did my best. I talked, instead of keeping my mouth shut. I testified and gave up my private life, my most intimate feelings and memories. I fought a battle on TV and in the newspapers. Even when some media accused me of insanity, of being a vicious cheater and conspirator, I went on telling what happened. And I will never stop. I will not abandon my friends and the children who are still being abused now. I'm convinced that even a single person can make a difference.

I barely speak to Belgian journalists anymore. The establishment has silenced them. But more and more foreign journalists from Europe and America call me and ask what in the world is going on in Belgium? They are all very shocked when they read my story and when they see the virtual reality produced by our justice system.

On 21 April 2002 Frank Connolly, a journalist from the Irish Sunday Business Post, published an article about my story on the newspaper's website. He had interviewed me before at my home. He had also spoken to Wilfried Martens, former Belgian prime minister and chairman of the European People's Party. Although his name was not mentioned in the article, Martens filed a slander lawsuit in Brussels against the Sunday Business Post.

On 5 May 2002 the BBC showed an excellent film on the Dutroux case. It was called Belgium's X-files. It had been made by Olenka Frenkiel and clearly demonstrated the cover up that was going on. I was very grateful to Olenka that I was allowed to speak and explain briefly that my testimony was being destroyed because too many important people were involved in the networks. At least the BBC didn't think I was crazy. The film was also shown on BBC World. I have to mention that when the BBC team returned home after they investigated, their suitcases had been broken into. Was it to find something the world wasn't supposed to know or was it just a coincidence that the luggage of only the two BBC people had been searched?

Marcel Vervloesem from the Morkhoven Group, an organisation fighting paedophilia on the Internet has had over thirty house searches in two years. They were the people who exposed Gerry Ulrich the Dutch paedophile at whose apartment near The Hague the Dutch police in 1998 found over 50.000 photos of children tortured in unthinkable ways.

This was shown on CNN. Some people would love to catch Marcel with photos in his house so they could convict him as a paedophile. On whose side are the police?

To my amazement the Belgian TV station in the Dutch language VRT showed the BBC film in June and Olenka was allowed to speak about her film on VRT on 20 June. She clearly stated that it was obvious that the normal course of justice had not been followed in the Dutroux case because of numerous interventions.

I was impressed that VRT took this risk and I hope that the journalists who allowed Olenka to speak will not be harassed as happened to other ones before. Or are people really starting to believe me now?

I will always remember my good friend Clo, her smile, but also her tears and her death. I still miss her every day and sometimes I visit her grave. I will never forget the screams, the yelling, the begging or the silent tears from all the other victims.

To all the victims I say: I respect you dearly. I will always honour you. You were my voice, my strength, and my reason to speak out. I salute every one of you.

And finally to my husband, children and friends: With an incredible patience you all gave me back the belief in life, the belief in myself. You healed my wounds; you all are my reason to live and to go on. Not in a hundred years will I be able to pay back what you did for me, but I can say, thank you, thank you and thank you again. I love you all very much.

But I have still hope that we can eventually do something about it. Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela and many other great human beings had to go through enormous suffering to achieve the freedom of their people. But they never gave up, they accepted to risk their lives, to face death. My people are all the children who are being tortured and abused. And I too have a dream that once, in a near future, my children will be free of torture, free of abuse by paedophile creatures that aren't worth the dirt on their shoes.

Ginny.
(Witness X1)